The Witches of Panay
The Fire Witch
Book 1
Malika Gandhi

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Malika Gandhi

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TO MY SONS, TRISHUL & DHANUSH

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EPILOGUE

PROLOGUE

The Last Generation Fire Witches

Kaya, N.E Panay

The Fire Witches watched the Tenkurian village from the sanctuary of their dwelling, stone and timber, three-storey building, set on the high banks of the river Soar. Even from there, they could see the non-stop, the hustle and bustle of the Tenkurian men. Their days may be filled with dread, and fear of what must come, but they were powerful creatures and carried on with their lives.

The power of magic hung heavy in the air of Panay, good and bad. The Tenkurian, aware of the threat from the dark Queen Regina, and her army, prepared for an uncertain future of what could be destruction and an end of their race. Perhaps of survival too, from the battle yet to come to them.

Nevertheless, they carried on, teaching the young ones who had come of age, to harness their powers and skills, the women by the side of the men, creating weapons with the control and influences of their mind. Half human, and half Elven, they formed a new race: The Tenkurian.

Warrior training became a daily occurrence, from dawn to dusk. Suriaya, Tempesa, Miha, Nebulah, and Yari, the five Fire Witches, let the Tenkurians ready for the imminent battle for this was a fight for them as much as it was for other witch clans, the Elvens, the Men, the Merpeople, and the dwarfs of Panay.

“They are ready,” Suriaya observed.

“We must act soon, before the Kaya brothers destroy them, sister,” Miha cited. “Enough fear is embedded in the poor Tenkurian souls... so many lives lost already.”

“Have all the Crystals been hidden?” asked Yari. She looked to Miha and Tempesa, whose responsibility it was to make sure they were scattered throughout the galaxy.

“All but one,” said Miha. “This crystal will be the portal between these worlds, for the next Fire Witches who succeed us.” She held a turquoise blue crystal in her palm and closed her other hand over it. When she opened her hand, the crystal was embedded in a silver case and was made into a necklace. “Our time will end soon sisters, and we must return to the creator of the Sun. This crystal holds enough power to regenerate us to defeat the evil of the Kaya brothers. I have made sure of that.

“After us, and when the universe is ready, the power of the Sun will create five new Fire Witches. The crystals are important, and they will restore peace throughout the galaxy. This pendant will open the realms in which the other four crystals are hidden. The next Fire Witches will need it to regenerate their powers via the sun. One crystal for each Fire Witch. We must not lose this pendant, as it is our lifeline too. We will take it in turns to wear it, but we must be careful. No one must see it.”

“Right then. Miha, please light the torches.” Suriaya rose from her chair. “It is time to travel.”

The Fire Witches held hands and spun to the outside of the house. A spell murmured, the undisturbed sand rose and spun around the witches, gaining powerful friction, grit against air, spinning faster and faster. The witches now obscured from view, they disappeared. They came to be in the South West of Panay.

(1)

BEACH STORM

Yorkshire, England

Placing white orchids at the base of three tombstones, they stood together. The sky above told the story of a typical British winter's day with clouds the colour of slate rolling over in an ever-darkening sky. The names engraved on the grainy stone had weathered in the last ten years but were still visible. Senon Marshorn, Marcaria Marshorn, and Leena Marshorn; their birth and death dates scripted in a language unfamiliar to the human world.

"We will have the names re-engraved in gold lettering, if you like, Pia," a tall woman spoke. Her dark hair fell to her waist in waves, and her flawless skin showed the age of a thirty-year-old witch than one who was nearing her hundred years.

"As you wish, aunt Serilda," Pia replied without enthusiasm. She stood head-to-head with her aunt; her emerald-coloured eyes downcast. She avoided looking at the tombstones.

The smallest one seared her insides, burning with a pain she wanted to go away. Feeling her tears threatening to spill, she blinked her eyes. She was the only one to stay alive, perhaps not remembering it was a blessing. Her aunt told her she was only five when it happened, her twin, Leena, and her mother and father didn't survive the crash.

Serilda blew into a blue and white printed handkerchief. Her daughter, Fleur, looked forlornly at the graves before her. She took Pia's right hand

and squeezed it, feeling a lump in her throat for a family she wished she had known.

“Your mother and father would have been proud of you, Pia.” Serilda sniffed into the handkerchief. “Had your sister been here... ”

Pia said nothing. She didn’t care about her perfect academic life. She wished she was at home. A flutter from a fallen leaf caught her eye, and then another shifted. A wind materialised, and soon a small storm of leaves covered the cemetery. The temperature plunged, and then Fleur screamed.

“We should get home,” said Serilda, her tone suddenly nervous. “Quickly, girls!” She ushered them through the gate and back to the car. Glancing at the dark clouds above, Serilda started her Range Rover, muttering, “It’s not normal, it’s not normal.” She sped away.

Pia slumped in the back seat with her headphones on, trying to forget the images of the grey slabs of her family. She remembered everything about them. She saw their faces perfectly in her mind, especially Leena. Her stomach tightened.

“Pia, are you listening to me?” Fleur shook her cousin’s elbow in frustration.

Pia pretended to be asleep. She didn’t feel like having a conversation. For good measure, she blocked Fleur from talking to her through telepathy.

“That’s not fair, Pia!” complained Fleur.

Pia continued to ignore her cousin. Outside, the storm brewed.

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Pia put on the bracelet Max gifted her and slid her fingers over the stones. Her chest rose and fell, her excitement at its peak. Pia allowed herself to

dream back to the day he took her to a fancy restaurant and pulled out a box from behind his back.

“I want you to have this,” he said, taking her hand and dropping the box on her palm.

“Oh Max! You need not give me a present. It’s not my birthday… but it’s sweet, thank you,” Pia said as an afterthought.

“Open it.”

Pia opened the lid of the box to reveal a silver bracelet studded in emerald and white stones.

“It’s beautiful, Max! Oh, it must have been expensive. I can’t take it.”

“I want to give it to you. Please wear it all the time.” Max’s face seemed to be in pain, but it disappeared quickly, replaced by a smile. “Please?”

“Err, okay.” Pia watched Max closely; what was going on? “So, you’re not going to tell me where you are going on your holiday?”

Max clasped the bracelet onto Pia’s left hand. “I’m not going on holiday. My parents live in New Mexico, and I will visit them.”

Pia kissed Max. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too,” Max kissed her back. “Promise me you will wear the bracelet every day.”

“I promise,” said Pia, and she kept it.

Pia and Fleur wrapped themselves up warmly in their coats, scarves, and boots. Blankets of powder snow sparkled as the sun hit the frozen crystals. Bare trees stood tall and strong with a bitter wind whistling through them. Pia shivered and walked closer to Fleur.

Serilda instructed the girls to deliver a backpack to Mike. It was imperative; she emphasised.

“What’s inside it?” Fleur asked curiously.

“That’s none of your business. Now, go on.” Serilda ushered them outside. “And make sure you are back early!”

“I don’t understand why I have to come,” moaned Fleur to Pia. “You could do this errand all by yourself.”

“I could,” Pia agreed. “But where’s the fun going to the beach all alone? Besides, a little exercise and fresh air will do you good.”

Thin snow laced the cobbled streets with watercolour blue skies washing the horizon as the girls reached the quaint winding road leading down to the coastal front of Robin Hood’s Bay. The street dazzled with different coloured Christmas lights and decorations. The usual ones hung off lampposts and inside the high street shops. Plastic fat Father Christmas’ and reindeer toys waved at passers-by from shop fronts. Ignoring the decorations, shoppers bustled past with bags full of presents.

Pia stopped to admire a white Christmas village display. The tree centred the village and little children, men, and women skied on a frozen lake.

“Can we buy it?” Fleur asked.

“Not at that price!” said Pia.

“Excuse me, love.” A stout woman with a warm smile stood behind them. “Can we get in? It’s freezing, and I have two very excited grandchildren!”

“Yes, sorry.” Pia smiled back and moved away from the doorway.

Pia and Fleur began to walk down the sloping road, but it wasn’t long before they stopped again. The shop looked homely, displaying a variety of Christmas-themed cakes and biscuits. This was enough to entice the girls to step inside the cosy bakery.

The aroma of freshly baked bread hit Pia, bringing a warm memory to her mind. The farmhouse kitchen filled two four-year-old girls with sublime happiness. Marcaria perched her daughters on the table bench and carried

on kneading the flour. A small timer went off. Marcaria dusted her hands on her apron and used a large wooden pan–size, handled slate to take the bread out from the open oven.

“Would you two like some?” Marcaria asked.

“Yes please, mummy!” Their eyes sparkled.

Marcaria laughed, slicing through the bread and buttering one side, before giving one to each of them on a plate. “Careful now, it is hot.”

The bell on top of the shop door rang, and a man entered. Pia jolted back to the present.

“So, what’s happening with you and Max?” Fleur eyed a particularly delicious looking iced éclair.

“What?”

“Max? Earth to Pia!”

“Oh, um, nothing,” said Pia and Fleur rolled her eyes.

A lady bustled towards them from behind the counter, “Yes, dears, what can I get you?”

“I would like an iced éclair and a cinnamon bun, please.” Fleur pointed at the delightful looking cakes through the glass cabinet.

“Are you going to eat them both?” Pia asked incredulously. “A minute on the lips, a lifetime on the hips... ”

Fleur looked at Pia, and then at the cakes.

“I’ll risk it,” she said with a grin. “So?”

“So... ?”

“You haven’t answered my question about Max,” said Fleur.

“What do you mean?”

“He has been home for a week now and you haven’t seen him yet. Are you two having a break?”

“No. We are seeing each other later today.”

“I see,” said Fleur.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” Fleur said. She was smiling again. Pia rolled her eyes this time.

Leaving the toasty shop, they were greeted with thick falling snow, making the street very festive. They continued down to the beachfront in high spirits and halted at the top of a set of stone steps, overlooking an almost snow-covered beach. Fleur sat on the first step and began to eat. Pia sat next to her and watched the mass of white foam heralded to the beach by the bitter wind.

Pia loved the coast. It may be cold, dark, and grey, and possibly depressing, but to her, it held a little piece of heaven, nature at its best. She closed her eyes and smelled the sea air.

“Where is Mike... hey, Pia, do you think we should tell Max about... you know?”

“No,” Pia said bluntly, her eyes still closed. “Are you mad?”

“Well, it’s not good to keep secrets and especially from a boyfriend.”

“I don’t want to keep Max in the dark, any more than you do. He is a good guy, but we can’t tell him, okay?”

“Hey!” A deep voice shouted from below them.

Pia and Fleur peered down where a man was standing in a thick jacket, a scarf, and a hat.

“Max? Is that you?” Pia shouted.

“Yes!” came the reply.

The butterflies in Pia’s stomach, which had quietened down, became alive again. She automatically placed her right hand on her bracelet. Pia picked up the backpack she had put down, and with Fleur, walked down the

slippery steps carefully, holding the rails. The cold crept through Pia's gloves.

"Max, what are you doing here?" she asked as they reached him.

"Hello, Max," Fleur said matter-of-factly, extending her hand forward to shake his.

Max shook her hand with amusement dancing on his face.

"Did you bring the backpack? Mike had something to do, a last-minute thing," he asked.

Max stood at the height of six feet and sported a biker's look. His face gave off a sexy and rugged appearance, with a bit of stubble on his chin. Fleur nudged Pia.

"Quit staring and give him the backpack!" Fleur hissed at her. Pia didn't respond. Fleur sighed and took the backpack from her.

"Here you go then," she held it out to Max.

"Thank you, Fleur," he smiled.

"Lovely," said Fleur. "So, now, I'll leave you two lovebirds then, if you don't mind. I fancy a bit of shopping. I'll catch you at home then, Pia."

"Lovebirds?" Pia hissed at Fleur. "Really!"

"Okay then, bye!" Fleur ran off and then stopped a little while away. "Have fun!"

"Fleur, wait!" Pia began to protest.

"I'll see you at home!" Fleur shouted back.

"Do you fancy a walk on the beach?" Max asked when Fleur disappeared out of sight.

"Perhaps I should go after her... " Pia said.

"She's a big girl; I'm sure she can look after herself. Come on, I need not be back until later."

"Okay," said Pia. "Sure. So, how was your visit?"

“It was great. I loved spending time with my parents. We travelled up and down the country, and then to the United States.” Max looked down at Pia, “I wish you could have come with me.”

“One day, I will,” Pia promised.

Max took Pia’s hand. “I see you are still wearing the gift I gave you.”

Pia blushed. “I suppose I am.”

They walked along the beach in comfortable silence for a bit, and then Max spoke again.

“I missed you, you know?”

Pia blushed, “I didn’t know you felt so strongly about me.”

“I know it is still early days, but I feel there is something special about you… Well, anyway,” Max brushed a hand over his hair and Pia saw two warm spots on his cheeks, “I’d better head off back to Mike’s and give him this backpack. What’s in it anyway, that’s so secretive?” Max asked.

“I don’t know. Aunt Serilda didn’t say.”

Max nodded but looked up to the sky, and Pia did the same. Max’s expression of curiosity mirrored her own.

“It looks like a snowstorm will hit. It’s best if I take you home,” he said.

As they turned to head back to the street, the sky turned completely white, and silence fell.

“I’m calling Fleur,” Pia said in a worried tone. She took her phone from her bag and dialled Fleur’s number. She didn’t pick up.

The air began to get colder and hazy. Small, but fierce, snow particles came down in a frenzy and swirled around them gaining momentum to the brink of no visibility. A wind whistled through their clothes. Pia and Mike shielded their eyes against the onslaught of wind and snow.

“It’s too late!” shouted Max. “Come on; I know a place to hide for a while until the storm calms down!”

Max and Pia sprinted down the beach. Snow particles crashed down on them, and it got harder to see where they were going.

“Stop, we’re here!” Max shouted again above the whistling wind.

Pia, out of breath, followed Max blindly, her hand in his. Freezing wind and snow bit into her exposed face, and then in the next minute, Max pulled her into a cave.

“Thank God!” said Pia. “Please let this storm roll over!”

(2)

DARK MAGIC

The snowstorm crashed around the cave with the speed of an avalanche, directing a powerful wind into the cavern itself, causing sounds, like that of a banshee, to echo in the darkness.

Pia and Max covered their ears and crouched away from the entrance. As they watched, snow particles swiftly hid the sea and sand from view. Pia's heart pounded, and worrying thoughts whirled around in her head. Would they be able to escape this storm, and... what about Fleur? Where was she, was she safe? Pia checked her phone, and as she suspected, there was no signal. With a sinking heart, she realised no one would know that she and Max were trapped, and, therefore, no one would know where to look for them.

Pia and Max became quiet, as the storm continued relentlessly, for all they could do was to wait and hope the storm would subside soon. Another sound materialised; banshee. It was louder than the wind and it became shrill, causing the pain in their ears to treble and quadruple in volume.

"Aaagh! I can't stand this, Max!" Pia yelled.

She tried to block the sounds with a spell, but she couldn't do it. Then, as suddenly as the storm arrived, it stopped, and a nerving silence followed. Pia opened her eyes, letting her arms fall beside her as she stood up, annoyed by a dull pounding vibrating through her skull.

She turned to Max, who was staring at the mouth of the cave. The snow had accumulated to the cave's ceiling of the opening and had mostly

blocked any light from the outside. The air inside the cave was now at freezing point, and Pia's hands and face felt numb. Before she could comment, a strange, mysterious, green mist surrounded her and Max. Pia felt an unusual presence, and it filled her with dread.

"Max, we need to get out of here." Pia tugged at his arm.

As soon as the words came out of her mouth, the mist and the cold vanished, and Pia could feel her hands and face again. Pia shook Max urgently.

"Max?" He hadn't spoken since... they entered the cave! She turned her head toward him; he was frozen. His glazed eyes were far away as if he was in a trance.

"Max! Wake up!" *I'll have to use my magic; it's the only way. This is an emergency, Aunt Serilda will understand. I have no choice!*

Pia took a blue powder packet out of her jean pocket and took a pinch. With her hand directed at Max, she blew on the powder and watched it cascade over him, causing a thin blue film drape over him like a blanket, and then vanish. Pia thought her spell hadn't worked, that was until Max blinked and his body relaxed. He was back!

Pia exhaled under her breath.

"See, I told you the snowstorm wouldn't last," Max said, not realising he'd been in a trance.

"What?" Pia asked.

"The snow, I told you, it wouldn't last," Max repeated. "Look for yourself."

Max was right. The snow at the entrance of the cave had melted entirely, and the snowstorm had stopped.

"That was some freak show," Max commented.

“Max.” Pia took his hand. “Let’s get out of here.” She was too eager to get away, and as soon as possible. Before they left, she noticed the backpack on the floor of the cave. She swung it onto her shoulder as they left.

The beach was completed covered now; pure white snow crystals stretched out over the sand, like a thick fluffy blanket. The sea had frozen up to a hundred yards out; the seagulls had fled, and time seemed to stand still. The weak sun cast long shadows of Pia and Max over the stark land. A hushing sound washed over them, one that seemed to come from everywhere. It sounded like a voice, like a summoning.

“This is amazing and frightening at the same time,” said Max.

“Are you crazy?” Pia scoffed. “What happened here is not amazing. Frightening, yes, but not amazing.”

Ignoring Pia, Max headed for the stairwell, the very one which Pia and Fleur had come down from earlier that day.

“Max, where are you going? Wait, slow down!” Pia went after him, trying not to slip on the snow. She cursed under her breath as she stumbled, almost falling on the stairwell that Max had successfully climbed. He was standing at the top when she arrived, with her hands holding onto her waist.

“Max, that... that was a very... stupid thing to do!” she panted between breaths. The pain in her chest was staggering. “Now what are you staring at?”

“I need to go to the cottage.” Max pointed to a small white building on the far side of the cliff. It was isolated from other houses and seemed to stand near to the end of the cliff itself. No safety barriers were visible.

“Why do you want to go there? It doesn’t look safe... or a good idea. Let's go home.” Pia’s reasoning did not affect him, for he began to walk in the

direction of the cottage, again without waiting for her.

Cars and vans screeched into the car park, skidding on the ice, and haphazardly coming to a stop, making Pia turn and stare. Reporters, dressed in heavy coats and jackets, jumped out of their vehicles holding mikes, cameras, and other media equipment. For a moment, they stood in the same spot, taking in what the freak snowstorm had left behind in its wake.

“Wow, this is amazing!” a woman exclaimed. She wore a tweed coat, with a matching hat, gloves, and scarf. She didn’t look like a reporter at all, but more like an associate or partner of a prestigious firm.

“Peter, make sure you get the beach behind me in the camera shot. I must be in the centre,” said one reporter, standing tall and ready with the mike in his hand. He wore a grey, stiff coat, the type you see in catalogues. It didn’t escape Pia’s notice that the reporter was good looking too.

“You have the angle right, don’t you, Peter?” he commanded.

“Yes, Mr Sileby. I’ll be ready in two,” said the cameraman. He adjusted the tripod the camera was balanced on, and then rubbed his ice-cold hands over his puffed jacket, finally adjusting his multi-coloured knitted hat.

More media companies turned up, taking up the remaining space in the small car park. They dashed to the beach, setting up their equipment for filming. There was activity everywhere; reporters had situated themselves at various points on the beach talking into the cameras and pointing to the area behind them. Their eyes may have been bright from the cold snap, but it excited them all the same to talk about such a bizarre weather event.

More people turned up to the beach; families with little excited children who dragged sledges behind them, young and old couples holding hands, people with their walking sticks, and groups of curious teenagers.

A reporter spotted Pia and bounded towards her. He wore a grey suit, with a blue tie. His spectacles had fallen onto the end of his nose, which he

corrected, and then shoved a mike in her face.

“Hello, I’m Jack Cross from Channel One,” he introduced himself.

“I know who you are.” Pia sensed a barrage of questions coming her way. “But I have to go.”

“It won’t take a moment, Miss… just a few questions. Can you tell me if you witnessed the snowstorm? Were you trapped here when it struck?” the reporter asked, without stopping for breath.

Other reporters arrived behind him, and they, too, started throwing questions at her. The words jumped over one another. Nothing was making any sense.

“What do you think caused such a storm?”

“Were you scared?”

“How did you avoid the storm?”

Pia said nothing, just stared dumbly at the cameras. The reporters gave up on her when she didn’t answer them and went to bombard other members of the public instead. Pia sighed in relief and turned to the activity on the beach. The humans squealed and shouted in delight as they stepped foot on the snowed down beach. Some went to the sea edge and touched the ice.

“Wow, man! This is unreal!” a man who seemed to be in his twenties, and fashioned long, braided hair, shouted.

More people arrived, some with pets. It was amusing to see dogs refusing to follow their humans, barking in stubbornness to stay away from the cold carpet. The humans tied their pets to anything they could find and went to join all the other people on the beach. Just then, Pia realised that the snowstorm had touched nothing else but the beach and sea... and then she remembered Max! The last hour was not a natural occurrence, and neither was Max going to that cottage. But now she couldn’t see him.

Oh no. She had a bad feeling about this. Dark magic was at play here, the green vapour, Max freezing, the snow-covered beach, and now, Max taking off like a puppet being pulled by its master. Pia began to run.

She reached the cottage with no more distractions, and as she had thought, the cottage was sitting on a sloping edge, towards the cliff. She didn't like the idea of going into it, but she had to find Max. Pia contemplated using magic to find him, but she didn't dare use it, not on these grounds that were saturated with dark magic.

It gave off a distinctive smell. Humans would describe it as sweet, but it burned her nose. To Pia, it reminded her of loss and sadness. She recalled the loss of her parents and sister. She shook her head, to get rid of the memory, and blocked the smell of the magic by casting a simple spell around herself. Then, she carried on forward.

A crooked gate separated the house from Pia. She was wary of what surprises she may encounter; she must tread carefully. Stepping onto the misshapen crazy paved floor that seemed to go on forever, she concentrated on her footing. The paving seemed to move, making her feel dizzy. A cackle from somewhere made her look up, and she noticed that the cottage was no longer in sight!

A fountain greeted her instead, one with water gushing out of the mouths of ugly and frightening-looking snakes. Entwined between the dozen stone snakes, were statues of bullfrogs, mice, and other such vermin. Pia shuddered.

Continuing, she stopped a few steps ahead and came to a very tall, brown, door. The door was old-fashioned, something you would find in a horror movie. The black iron bolts and locks were massive and seemed

impossible to unlock. She touched the door with the tips of her fingers, feeling for a way to open it when, suddenly, she was thrown to the ground. Pia screamed in pain as burn marks rose on her arms, but the charm had not touched her face.

With a deep breath, and with a strong will to find Max, Pia summoned up her courage.

Only a demon witch would be behind this, but Pia hoped she was wrong. She would not take any chances and playing nice would not work here. She would have to use magic, no matter what the consequences would be later. Pia pointed her wand at the door. It was a simple spell and an effective one.

Udghatita Dvara! The heavy spell hit the door, and a sound like smashing glass vibrated around her. The door split and the locks and bolts collapsed in on themselves, disintegrating at the last minute. Pia kicked the door, and it fell backwards, smashing into pieces as it hit the ground. Green vapour emanated from the pieces, as Pia stepped over them. The vapour was like the one she had met at the cave; with the same smell that she associated with sadness, and loss.

When the vapour cleared, Pia cursed in frustration. The other side of the vapour brought her to a garden, with the cottage still nowhere in sight. It was all an illusion!

“No!” she shouted. “You are not doing this to me!”

Giant, emaciated-looking trees and, bedraggled shrubbery and plants, lined the narrow garden on both sides. A grey, footpath divided the garden, and a feeling of unwontedness and destruction spoke here. The footpath led to another door. Pia hoped that this one was not charmed.

“Pia... Pia... ”

She turned. Where did that voice come from? Her heart hammering, she continued down the path, each step taken in caution.

“Pia! Pia!” This time the voice was louder and stronger. It sounded like Max.

“Max! Where are you?” Her heart skipped a beat.

Overhead, the sky began to turn dark. The trees slowly began to bend forwards, coming for her. Their elongated, twisted, finger-like twigs curled, and uncurled, coming closer, and closer. The shrubs moved from side to side, shedding their leaves, which flew in Pia’s face.

She screamed, lashing at anything that came her way, as she ran down the path. A vine caught her ankle, and she tripped. Fumbling with the vine, she cursed again, as the fingers of the trees caught her hair, and scratched her face.

“Use your magic, Pia!” The voice sounded far away.

Magic! She aimed her hands at the offending foliage and spat out a spell. The vine untwined, and the trees withdrew at speed, quickly becoming straight again. The shrubs then became lifeless, and light poured back into the garden.

Pia stood up and dusted down her clothes. She stopped to breathe normally again and looked for the door. However, there was no door anymore. A hundred yards away, was where the cottage now stood.

(3)
THE LURER’S HOUSE

Pia stood at the foot of the cottage with its thatched roof and whitewashed walls. The thin glass windows were framed with white wooden frames and decorated with decorative paper butterflies, a child’s work of awkward painted primary colours.

All was silent, with no movement in the garden before her; the sky was blue, and the sun shone brightly. Pia felt, well, cheerful. A tawny-looking cat sat by the doormat, licking its paws. It looked up at Pia and meowed, and then it resumed its grooming. Pia wondered if the cat was female or male; she could never really tell. She used to play with their adopted cat, Thomas, when she was younger; it was very similar to this one. The cat suddenly stopped grooming, upped, and left through a cat flap that Pia was sure wasn’t there before.

The garden became a hive of activity. Rabbits hopped onto the lawn, a tortoise ambled across from one end to the other end of its patch, and the paper butterflies became alive, flying in and around red, white, and orange roses and other such beautiful flowers. Pia bent down to stroke a white bunny that stopped at her feet.

“What a gorgeous thing you are,” Pia commented. She was so happy here that she didn’t want to leave this garden or the animals. She wished she could stay here, like this, forever... What was she thinking? She’d almost forgotten about Max again! All this was just a distraction, and she’d forgotten where she was!

“Open the door, you wicked witch!” Pia hammered on the door, and as she did so, the animals disappeared. The sun vanished, and rolls of black cloud drew in towards the garden, turning everything that was once colourful, grey. The screaming coming from the house crippled Pia, and she pushed her hands against her ears to drown it out, but then it halted as the door opened.

“Hello, dear.” An old lady with spectacles on a large, long nose, greeted her. “I’ve been expecting you, Pia. I see you are very talented.”

Pia stepped back and flinched when the old lady went to take her hand. Why didn’t she see it before? How could she have been so blind? She was at a witch’s lair, the dwelling of a demon witch – a Lurer.

The witch smiled at Pia, who didn’t return the smile. “Where is Max, and what have you done to him?”

“He is in the lounge, waiting for you.” The witch turned and walked down a long corridor, with nothing but flickering lamps on the walls, lighting the way ahead.

“Where are you taking me?” Pia asked, wearily.

The witch said nothing but walked on. Pia shook with nerves, not wanting to follow, but knowing she had to. Eventually, they came to a set of stairs that seemed to spiral downward. It was a very long way down.

“Have you imprisoned Max down there?” Pia accused.

“Imprisoned? Now, why would I do such a thing like that? You are letting your imagination run wild, my child,” the witch replied with a cackle.

The gloom of the cottage became darker as they began the descent. Pia could only follow the old hag. Eventually, they came to a black, iron door. The witch took an elongated iron key from her gown pocket and slotted it into the keyhole. The door swung open without a sound.

“Come in, my dear,” said the witch.

Pia was brought into a brightly lit, normal-looking lounge. There was nothing gloomy here. In fact, everything was cheerful. Paintings of Yorkshire landscapes, the Scottish Highlands and other places hung on the walls, a two-seater nestled in a corner, with a flat TV in another. Wait, Max was on the two-seater! A heady smell of sweet perfume overwhelmed her, Pia's eyelids felt heavy, and through the haze, she saw her sister, and then the room began to sway before her.
She heard a distant, "Noooooo!"
Everything went black.

*

"Pia?"

Pia found Fleur looking down at her. She was back home, in her bed. "How did I get here and what am I doing here? I was so close, Fleur. Max is in trouble, I nearly got him out of there!"

"I used a spell, to get you and Max out of that cottage," said Fleur. "I was really worried, are you all right? Do you feel ill?"

"I'm fine... , I am," said Pia. "Wait, did you say, you got Max out too? Where is he?"

"He is downstairs with Ma, and he is all right. I got you two out in time; although Max seemed shaken up and confused. He doesn't remember a thing... , Ma saw to that." Fleur watched Pia for a while.

"You realised the witch was a Lurer," she stated.

"You've been reading my mind." Pia smiled.

"Guilty." Fleur smiled back..

"I realised when I saw her. I shouldn't have entered the house, but I had to get Max. Some witch I am!" Pia got out of bed and found she was

dressed in her nightdress. “Fleur, what time is it?”

“It’s past eight at night. The spell I used was heavy, sorry, but it did you and Max good. It rested your mind too.” Fleur looked apologetic.

“I feel rested,” said Pia. “It’s okay; you saved us both, you are a hero.”

“Anyone could have fallen into the Lurer’s trap,” Fleur reasoned. “They are conniving and malicious witches, not to mention more powerful than either of us. I don’t blame you for coming under her influence.”

Pia remembered when Aunt Serilda told her and Fleur what a Lurer was: a witch who acted as a taker of humans and creatures alike – sometimes for her own gain to replenish power and dark magic inside her, but most times to earn riches of Gold and Silver.

Pia stared at Fleur in confusion. “How did you know where we were? Weren’t you in town or meant to be somewhere else?”

“When the storm suddenly conjured up, I was on my way home,” said Fleur. “But I felt it’s power. I didn’t know the extent of it, but I took shelter in an unused bus stop and tuned into what was happening. The snowstorm hit the cliffs first and then moved onto the beach like a possessed immortal. I ran back to the beach, but couldn’t find you or Max. I used my mind to locate you, and that was when I saw you enter the cottage. I knew I had little time but thankfully, I managed to transport you two back here. I must have broken a thousand magical rules, but I don’t care.”

“Shabdkosh,” Pia and Fleur said together.

“It is also a hazardous form of magic to use.” Serilda entered the room. She didn’t look angry. No, more relieved. “I’ve spoken to the council about what happened, and they want to see both of you sometime soon.” Serilda took the girls in her embrace. “Don’t worry, they have waived the spell you used, Fleur, but only this once, and only because I reasoned with them. However, I am proud of you to act quickly to bring your cousin and Max

back from the Lurer. And, Pia, I am proud that you didn't leave Max and went to rescue him. You both are my brave girls, but I wish you could have come to me first."

"There was no time, aunt Serilda."

Serilda nodded an agreement. "It's all right. Max has gone home, and he doesn't remember a thing. I gave him the backpack which he promised to give to Mike. It is imperative."

*

Serilda was reading an ancient, hefty book when Pia and Fleur went to sleep. A gold outline of a bird was embossed on a black felt cover, and the thick pages seemed to be bound by a coarse string. Serilda moved the book to the floor and pushed it under the coffee table.

"Keep an eye on the girls, won't you, Relic?" A cat meowed. "Good girl, I won't be long."

*

Serilda was flustered and anxious. The time was drawing near for Pia. She had to do something, and soon. Serilda tiptoed. She kept out of the glare of the streetlights and moved under cover of trees and dark lanes. Her wand was clutched tight in her fist while she observed her whereabouts conspicuously.

Pia had told her everything, and the green haze that Pia had described, wasn't a mystery. It was the work of a Lurer who used magic to locate Pia

and Max. She had conjured the snowstorm, and she had lured them into her lair. Pia and Max were lucky to be alive, and she was proud of her daughter's quick thinking. However, Serilda felt unease at the pit of her stomach.

The lane began to slope downwards, making Serilda stride faster. She heard a cry as if something was in despair. She stopped and strained to hear more, but the call didn't come again. Resuming her brisk pace, Serilda stole down the lane until she reached Mike's residence.

The house was hidden from view and any cars that passed by, even with their headlights on full beam, wouldn't have been able to see the house due to its high hedges. Mike was a sorcerer in the magical community, but he was also a supplier of fish and other seafood, to the local human community. Outside his house, an old rowing boat lay in the mud where dirt, dead leaves, twigs, and a little rainwater, lay on the bottom. There were fishing rods, and some nets lying against a black pipe, on the wall of his house. Mike made sure his house looked as normal as possible; he didn't like the magical community coming knocking at his door unless he had given them the privilege, as he had to Serilda.

A light was visible through the frosted, semi-circular door window. Serilda pressed her hand on the door and it unlocked; Mike had granted her permissions for access to his home. Stepping inside the warm house, she called out to him.

"In here," came a muffled sound, somewhere down the hallway.

Serilda found Mike in his workroom, examining the object she had sent him earlier that day.

(4)
THE PENDANT AND PIA

Mike’s white hair, long in a ponytail, shone in the firelight, as he stared at the pendant in his work-lined palm. He stroked his equally, long beard, turning this delicate, and most beautiful stone over and over, his gaze refusing to leave the circular motion.

Serilda, dressed in a multi-coloured robe, quietly came in and sat on the rug opposite him, taking in the aromatic, warming smell of the soft, low fire. Shiny Christmas cards hung on a string from one end of the lounge to the other end, and a mouth-watering aroma filled the air.

“That smells lovely, Mike,” Serilda noted.

“It’s a roast. Would you like some? It’s only a small one, but enough for the two of us,” Mike offered, putting the pendant down on a white cloth before him.

“No, stay where you are,” Serilda said. “I’ve come to talk to you about something, and it cannot wait.”

Mike stood up and walked over to the drinks cabinet. Unlike Serilda, he wore a white shirt, and a pair of coffee-coloured trousers. It didn’t go unnoticed that Mike was also wearing one of his long, stringed, neck ornaments around his neck.

Serilda’s eyes moved to the pendant sitting on the cloth, the very one she had Max bring here. Mike was now busying himself with taking out two crystal glasses, and a bottle of ancient wine. He poured each of them a generous amount.

“I’m sure we can permit this tonight, don’t you think, Serilda?”

“Yes please, I won’t say no to that!” Serilda took a glass from him, and Mike made himself comfortable on the floor again, placing his glass on the coffee table. He took the pendant back in his hand.

“This is a fascinating object,” Mike said as he turned it over, scrutinising it. “... Very fascinating.” The sapphire-coloured stone was encased in a round, silver frame, and attached to a plain, silver neck chain. As the reflection of the flames danced on the ornament, pinpricks of white and gold, bounced around inside the stone in a frenzied manner.

“Where did you find it?” Mike asked. “And what are those white and gold things?”

“Actually, I hoped that you could tell me,” Serilda said, and she explained further. “When Pia was brought to me, she was wearing this around her neck. I thought it was a keepsake pendant from my sister, so I put it away in a safe place. I have taken it out every year on her birthday for a polish and have fastened it around Pia’s neck. As she grew up, I told her the story of her mother and father’s excellence in their work, or about the times they took her to the seaside. Now she is older... she shows no interest in my stories or this pendant anymore.” There was a catch of sadness in her tone. “This year when I took it out of the safe place, I saw this activity on the pendant. I’ve never seen it before. I’m frightened; it must mean something.”

Serilda took a sip of her wine. “Do you know, Mike, it was Marcaria’s pendant?” Serilda felt a lump in her throat.

Mike picked up his wine and took a sip too. Serilda remembered the day like it was yesterday. It was a hot summer's evening. A younger Serilda was playing with a tiny Fleur in the back garden. An inflatable pool was filled with water. The house was quiet, and the day was serene, void of the neighbour’s cars slamming, children shouting or screaming in the street,

and no noise pollution from any vehicles. Fleur and Serilda had fallen asleep on a chaise lounge under the shelter of a patio awning.

She heard her name be called three times, before she opened her eyes and saw Aradna standing before her. Aradna was an Informer who worked for the Magical Administration of Witchery and Warlocks, the Witches Council, UK Division. She was dressed in red robes and her hair was the colour of blazing fire, however, her face resembled a porcelain doll. Did Aradna float right into the garden?

"Aradna?" Serilda lifted her sleeping daughter off her lap and placed her on the chaise. Brushing herself down, she stood to Aradna's attention.

Serilda didn't like the look on Aradna's face, which was of sorrow.

"I hope all is well?" Serilda questioned her, but an uneasy spell tugged at her heart.

"My dear Serilda." Aradna took Serilda's hands. "Please, come and sit with me. I have some news."

Aradna took Serilda away from Fleur and conjured up two comfortable chairs.

"What news?" Serilda sat on one chair, with the other one taken by Aradna herself.

"There's been an incident," said Aradna. "I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Serilda, but... your sister and brother-in-law seem to have been Taken. I'm very sorry."

A few moments passed as this information sunk in. "What do you mean, Aradna?" Serilda realised her tone sounded strained.

"Witches have come to this world, mysterious and powerfully strong. These are creatures the Council have not seen or encountered before. They seem to be of a different hybrid-species, a cross between a witch and something else. We have concluded that they are after an object, and in their

search, destroyed whoever came in their way. Several of our fighters have lost their lives, and some are tremendously injured.

“We are afraid for the civilians of this country; the witches do not care for them or their world. A whole village has been attacked. It has taken many weeks for the council to calm things down and clear the memories of the humans. In the last crossfire duel between these witches, Senon and Marcaria were amongst the wand duellers. We never found their bodies, we believe these witches, whom we fear have taken them, are Lurers from another world, not Panay, but somewhere else.”

“But you just said that you have never seen them before, how you know they are Lurers?” asked Serilda. “This makes little sense, Serilda.”

“They are not obvious Lurers. These ones... were well dressed, and didn’t have the usual markings of Lurers from Panay. Our investigators are looking into it; meanwhile, there is Pia. Serilda, as nominated guardian by Marcaria and Senon, it falls upon you to take her in, unless you refuse. You and Fleur are her only family, with whom she is familiar with.”

“What about Locklan and Sorasi? What if they come after Pia, are they aware of what’s happened?” feared Serilda.

“Senon’s brothers will have nothing to do with Pia. The signed legislation is non-negotiable, and it is magically bound, but should you refuse to take her in, then the guardianship can revert to them.”

“Then, they will have nothing to do with Pia,” said Serilda with determination. “Pia is my family, my daughter now. No one will take her away from me. Where is she, Aradna?”

“She is with us,” Aradna replied.

“Wait, you didn’t mention Leena?”

“I’m sorry, we don’t know. There is no trace of her, we have looked high and low, but all we found was a pink child’s backpack, not far from

Marcaria and Senon's house. We believe it was hers."

"Could she be Taken too? You didn't find Marcaria or Senon's body either," said Serilda hopefully.

"We honestly, don't know, we could not detect any Lurer activity around her backpack. Maybe she fled when she saw them coming for her, but at this stage, we can't be certain."

"No!" Serilda dropped to her knees. "No, no, no."

"Pia is waiting to meet you, Serilda."

"Just, just bring her to me, please Aradna. I need to see her."

"Régade is bringing her shortly," said Aradna. Régade was another Informer and worked with Aradna. As if on cue, the doorbell rang. "That will be him now."

Serilda opened the door to a man in a bottle green robe. Silver, embossed letters, M.A.W.D were visible on the sides of his attire. Régade was from the Magical African Warrior Division and had joined the European division on an urgent request. With eyes the hue of copper, and a russet complexion, he looked the mighty, powerful duel warrior that he was trained as, but this did not faze Aradna, who took him in her stride.

Like Aradna, Régade was a mystical being and worked well with the Spirit Horses and the Faes. They knew what, where, and why everything happened; however, not everything could be controlled. Their knowledge and expertise in spells and magical combat were of the highest calibre in the magical world.

"Serilda, greetings." Régade's deep voice told of his sadness.

"Is Pia with you?" Serilda asked bluntly.

A small, thin girl peeped out from behind Régade. Her emerald eyes and silver hair were a true giveaway that she was her mother and father's daughter.

“Oh, my darling, Pia.” Serilda scooped Pia into her arms, unable to stop her tears.

“We’ll leave you two to get acquainted,” Aradna said, coming up behind her. She looked to her colleague. “Régade?”

Régade nodded and then embraced Pia. “Be good for your aunt, won’t you? She will love you till the end of the world.”

“Will I see you both, Mama, Papa, and Leena, again?” five-year-old Pia asked. Serilda’s heart screamed, Pia didn’t understand anything of what had happened.

“Of course,” smiled Régade. His face appeared to be in pain.

“Pia, do you like chocolate ice-cream? I remember that you used to love it when you were just three years old.” Serilda blinked her tears away.

“Oh yes, I do!” Pia squeaked in delight.

Aradna and Régade smiled. “Goodbye, Serilda. Goodbye, Pia.”

A few yards away, the informers vanished, leaving nothing but a swirl of dust behind them.

A loud bang brought Serilda out of her thoughts.

“Sounds like a car has backfired,” Mike said, amused. “Are you all right, Serilda? You seem to be in your own little world.”

“I’m okay, thanks, Mike.” Serilda drained her glass of wine. “Can I have another? I’m quite parched.”

Mike poured her another glass. “So... Pia thinks her parents just died, along with Leena?”

“How did you know that?” gasped Serilda.

“The pendant showed me. I saw the conversation between you and that pretty informer.” Mike smiled.

“The pendant showed the conversation to you. How is that even possible?” Serilda was stunned.

“It seems this is one of its magical qualities.” Mike seemed serious now. “What we need to find out is if it could depict any memory and translate it anywhere, and to anyone. This pendant would be very dangerous in the wrong hands. And what about Pia? What will you tell her?”

“About what?”

“Oh, come on, Serilda. You can’t keep something like this from Pia, or Fleur. The girls are fourteen and fifteen. And regarding Pia’s parents and her twin, it may be time to tell Pia the truth,” advised Mike.

Serilda looked down into her glass. “I dread for that time to come, the time to tell her what happened to her family.”

“The later you leave it to tell her, the more hurt Pia will be. It’s time, Serilda; the girl will also be the age to do what she wants, in our world at least. Imagine what that would mean.” Mike looked directly at Serilda.

Serilda was afraid of that. She knew exactly what that would mean. Pia would have the freedom to use magic without permission. Being sixteen would mean that she could go after the Lurers who took her parents.

“I’m scared,” Serilda voiced her fear. “Pia and Fleur saw a Lurer today who tried to take Max. The storm was a Lurer’s work, I’m sure.”

“Well, that’s news to me! Max mentioned nothing,” exclaimed Mike.

“He couldn’t, could he? According to him, nothing unusual happened this afternoon.” Serilda went onto explain the snowstorm and spell Fleur used. “I erased his memory.”

“But why would the Lurer want to take Max? It makes no sense. Lurers are not prone to take humans, unless for a specific reason,” Mike said thoughtfully.

“That’s something I need to find out about,” said Serilda. Something flashed in her eyes, and her gaze fell to the pendant. She knelt and took the pendant from Mike’s hand.

“Look at this, Mike,” she said.

She watched the pinpricks joining to form a symbol: a tree surrounded by a square. Neither Mike nor Serilda had seen a sign like this before.

“What could it mean?” asked Serilda.

“Nothing bad, I hope,” replied Mike. “Leave the pendant with me for a few days, and I will find out what I can. I will need to do some clever, magical experiments.”

“Thanks, Mike.” Serilda looked at her watch. “I’d better get home. The girls are alone.”

“Goodnight, Serilda,” said Mike. “Oh, and if I were you, I’d use the quickest method of getting there.”

Serilda nodded. Placing her arms over her chest, she whispered, Iyate, and disappeared.

(5)

THE MIST

Serilda appeared back in her lounge, relieved to find neither Pia nor Fleur waiting up for her. She took off her outdoor robe, and draped it on a chair, and then made her way to the kitchen. Worry was an understatement of what she was feeling, she realised with a sigh. Her thoughts turned to the pendant as she opened the fridge door, the light spilling out in a vibrant glow around her, which illuminated her face full of uneasiness and weariness.

She took out a carton of fresh orange juice and poured herself a glass. Kicking off her heels, she padded back to the lounge where she made herself comfortable on a sofa chair, clutching her juice, but not drinking it.

The pendant was unique, for it had demonstrated one of its powers. Serilda was sure it had many other hidden qualities. She hoped Mike could find more on this unique stone that she had found on Pia's neck that day she was brought to her. But she wondered who originally owned it. Could the pendant have been Marcaria's, to begin with? As children, she never recalled seeing it. She was sure it wasn't something passed down through the generations, her sister would have told her if that was true. Marcaria was her younger sister, and they kept no secrets between them. Perhaps it was a gift from Senon, to Pia, or perhaps the pendant was passed down from his family.

However it came to be with Pia; this could be the object that those demon witches, the Lurers were looking for all those years ago. Serilda couldn't be sure, but it was a theory at least. Disturbed, Serilda wondered if it was

because of the pendant, that Marcaria and Senon, were Taken... and even killed? And what about poor Leena... was she murdered? No, she wouldn't believe it. Somewhere, her family was safe. They just needed to be found, and then they all could reunite. Mike said he would look into the pendant, find out what he can, experiment, but she needed to do a little research herself, Serilda decided. She couldn't just wait and do nothing. Perhaps, her volumes of Witchcraft books would give her some clue about this object, and she should scour the old photographs too! Serilda jumped at the sudden sound of footsteps coming down the stairs.

"Aunt Serilda, is that you?"

"Pia? Why aren't you asleep yet? It's past midnight," said Serilda, putting the glass of orange juice on the coffee table.

"I heard some noise," Pia said. "And I couldn't sleep. I was waiting for you to come home."

"Oh?"

"Can I speak with you, please? It's something that has been bothering me for some time now," Pia asked.

"Wait here." Serilda went to the oak sideboard and opened a drawer. She took out a box of chocolates and went back to Pia. "This sounds serious. Don't tell your friends what a bad aunt I am, but I think the chocolate is needed right now." Serilda winked.

"What's all this noise about?" Fleur walked in, covering her mouth with the back of her hand, to stop her yawning. "Is that chocolate?"

"You couldn't sleep either?" Serilda laughed. "Come join us."

"Am I disturbing a private conversation?" Fleur looked from her mother to her cousin.

"There are no secrets between us," said Pia. "And anyway, what I want to say concerns you too." Fleur snuggled up to Pia.

“Well, strange things have been happening around here, and the most bizarre part was when the Lurer tried to Take Max, and me. I could feel her evil; it came in waves. I can’t describe it, but for a moment, I was powerless. It was as if the Lurer drained me of my magic the more I stepped into the cottage. I couldn’t stop, but I had to get Max and get us both out of there. And, she nearly had us. What do you think it could mean, will the Lurer come back for us?”

“I hope not. Did you see anything inside the cottage that could give us a clue of what kind of creature this Lurer was? Perhaps then we could get to the bottom of this,” said Serilda.

“I thought Lurers were all witches?” Pia questioned.

“Not quite. They are demons that can come in any form, but they prefer their witch avatars,” said Serilda. “Do you remember any incident, or something unusual that could have happened, Pia?”

“No.” Pia shook her head. “The cottage looked like a human’s house, there was nothing strange about it, apart from the outside,” Pia replied. “There were many obstacles that tried to stop me from reaching the cottage, a locked door, charmed trees and vines... I remember there was a beautiful garden, and it was so lovely, with rabbits, a tortoise, and there were paper butterflies, that turned real!”

“That’s the Dener charm. The absolute Lurer’s trap for humans, but I don’t understand how you were affected. The Dener charm shouldn’t affect witches. Pia, did something else happen before you went to the cottage?” Serilda asked.

Pia thought back to the storm, and when she and Max were in the cave. The mist! It must have done something. “Aunt Serilda, a green mist surrounded us, but it was just for a second. Do you think it could have affected me?”

“I don’t think so, Pia. Mists’ don’t have magical or harmful qualities. Something else happened to you that day to have the Dener charm work on you. Think harder,” Serilda urged her.

Pia touched her left arm, absent-minded, “My bracelet! Where’s my bracelet?”

“What bracelet?” asked Serilda.

“The one that Max had given to me as a present.” Pia began to cry. “I can’t believe I lost it!”

Fleur put an arm around Pia. “It’s alright, we all lose things. It will turn up somewhere in the house, I’m sure.”

“Max told me to wear it all the time. He will ask where it is. If he finds out it has gone missing, it will hurt him,” Pia sniffed. “Oh, I’m useless. I can’t even look after jewellery!”

“Pia, when you said, Max had told you to wear it all the time, what did he mean?” Serilda asked now, intrigued by this new information.

Pia shrugged. “I don’t know. I suppose he meant it as a boyfriend way of things.”

“When did he give this to you?” Serilda asked.

“Just before he left for New Mexico,” said Pia, wiping her tears, and then blowing into a tissue that Fleur handed over to her. “Why?”

“When was the last time you saw it?” Serilda pushed.

“... I think... well, the morning when we were to take the backpack to Mike. We met Max instead, and the storm began. I remember we were running towards a shelter Max knew about, but I couldn’t see anything.” Pia gasped. “I dropped the bracelet in the snow!”

“Yes,” Serilda said thoughtfully. She wondered if the bracelet was charmed to protect or to weaken Pia’s magic, but why would Max want her

to wear it all the time? He was only human. Was she reading too much into this?

“Do you think the bracelet was a charm or something to weaken you, Pia?” Fleur voiced Serilda’s fears. “Nah, not possible. Max doesn’t even know what we are.”

“Before I went to the cottage; reporters bombarded me, one in particular. There were so many people around me, and the freak snow intrigued all of them. If something happened, I would have noticed,” Pia said, now thoughtful.

“Well, there is nothing we can do now, but I say, we leave it for today,” said Serilda. “I’m off to bed and I think you two should do the same. Goodnight, my sweet girls.”

Serilda kissed them both on the cheek before she headed upstairs, still in thought.

*

Pia lay in her bed, unable to sleep. Why was Max a target for the Lurer, or a bait to bring her into the demon’s lair? If so, why?

Pia watched Fleur sleep soundly in her bed and felt a pang of envy. Nothing troubled her pure soul, unlike her. Pia wished her troubled mind would stop wandering, and let her sleep too, just for tonight.

The window suddenly flew open, and a biting wind sashayed around the room. Fleur pulled her duvet over her head, and turned away from the window, murmuring in her sleep, “So cold, so cold... ”

Pia went to close the window, when she saw a green haze linger down in the lane, a few feet from the house. The haze seemed to spread out,

finishing at the trees where the woods began. An uneasy chill swept over her, and her head began to feel heavy.

Pia didn't close the window, no, she wasn't meant to do that. She was supposed to put her trainers on, and get dressed, and then go downstairs, out into the lane. That was the order given. Her mother was calling her; she was calling her in her need. Her mother was in trouble. Pia, without making a sound, left the house, and walked towards the haze.

"Ma, I'm here. Where are you?" Pia entered the haze but couldn't see her. "Ma?"

A cackling sound answered her, and it perplexed her. What was she doing here? The haze cleared, and in its place, stood a figure shrouded in robes. It began to walk towards her, each step deliberately slow. Pia couldn't see the face, for a mask covered it.

"Who are you?" Pia's mind went blank, she couldn't think of any spells to guard the witch away. Her body shook in fear.

"Oh, do you honestly believe that you could hurt me?" the creature cackled.

"How did you know I was going to do that?" Pia tried to be brave.

"I am more powerful that you could imagine." The witch stopped in her tracks. Pia still couldn't see her face.

"I'll curse you; I will!"

"Don't exhaust yourself, little Pia."

"How do you know my name?" Pia gasped.

"That question is irrelevant. Let us not waste time now. I have orders, of which I must fulfil. First, before I Take you, you have something of mine. I want you to hand it over." The creature held out a white, gloved hand. It looked almost skeletal, even through the material. Pia backed towards a tree.

“What are you?” she said.

The creature shrieked, sending shock waves through the air. Pia crashed her hands over her ears.

“How did you know where to find me, and why can’t I see your face? What do you want from me?” Pia shouted at the witch.

“So many questions!” the creature shrieked again. With one motion, it ripped the mask off its face.

Pia’s blood ran cold and she screamed. The creature’s face was skeletal, with eyes of crimson. Its hair seemed to be like coarse string, as it flew around its face.

“You’re a Lurer!” Pia whispered, sweat running down her neck. “I’ve... I’ve seen nothing like you.”

“It matters not if I am beautiful or... hideous.” The creature magicked the mask back on. “I have orders from the Queen. Give me the pendant now, ignorant child!”

What was the Lurer talking about? What pendant? Pia threw a blocking charm at the creature. It didn’t flinch, and neither did it try and block Pia’s feeble magic spell.

The creature was frightened of this queen, thought Pia. She was glad, for now she could see an escape.

“So, it’s a pendant you want. Without it, you can’t Take me to your queen,” Pia said almost to herself. “If I had it, and I don’t, I wouldn’t give it to you!”

“You are bluffing, little girl, I have no time for your games!”

Pia’s legs buckled, and she fell to the cold ground. Green vines snaked its way around Pia, and bound her hands and legs, cutting into her skin.

“Please, let me go,” Pia cried. “You’re hurting me.”

The creature cackled, and Pia’s scream enhanced, as the vines cut in deeper. Terrified, she couldn’t move. The magic inside her began to weaken, and the haze appeared once more. Blackness summoned her.

I need help; she summoned her last strength.

“LET MY DAUGHTER GO!”

Pia’s eyes opened a fraction, to see her aunt fighting the creature. Blue and white, strobing hurt her head. Then, she heard a faraway cry. Pia spiralled into a black hole of nothingness.

(6)

THE WORLD OF PANAY

He leaned against the cold, hard wall of the tower room. Brightly lit torches flickered on the walls of the corridor he had entered by the use of borrowed magic, although it had not been as easy as that. The area around Queen Regina's castle was heavily defended by her army of Orcs and was protected by the most potent spells and charms created by Regina herself. Sulo owed Crepala, a tribal witch, for helping him get inside the castle.

With it still being light, Sulo was safe from the night creatures, for now. As a precaution, he had brought his weapon with him; an ancient sword handed down from his own tribe. It was to be the most dangerous of all weapons and could beat any battle. Sulo was ready.

He wasn't a warlock but was a highly trained warrior; of that his father was proud of. And now, Mawabi was back, and Sulo needed to know if the demon witch had succeeded in her task.

"Just touch the stone," Crepala whispered before she disappeared before him. "I'll be here to take you back."

Sulo hid the stone under his metal tunic.

A large, iron cast pot held the black liquid, smooth as velvet. Neither vapour nor sound emanated from it. It lay still, as if dormant. Regina, the queen of all of Panay, stood before the pot, calm and still, just like the contents of the pot itself. Her hands clasped together; she was in no hurry to

speak but allowed herself to think it through first. Should she be irate? Perhaps she should let this one slide. Ah, choices, choices.

Regina’s reflection gazed back at her from the pot. She didn’t look angry, only calm, thoughtful, and beautiful. There was a magnificence about her that no one could deny. Fiery red curls fell around her shoulders like fallen fabric, framing a face that would stop any man or woman, for her emerald eyes held a command that couldn’t be ignored. If princesses of fairy tales were believed in, in the world of Panay, Regina would be one of them.

The sun had almost gone, and the blue moon was out. Candles lit the gloomy room, and shadows flitted across, and back again, circling Mawabi. Their terrifying sniggers broke the silence, but Regina’s curse resurrected the quiet again, tightening the throats of the Shadows.

Neither ghosts nor people of flesh and bone, they were cursed immortal souls, stuck in the realm of Darkness forced to do the bidding of evil. Regina’s castle housed some of these unfortunate beings; their travels through realms were useful in knowledge and experience... the ones who obeyed were rewarded with shiny stones and gems, and the ones who disobeyed her were destroyed.

It was half-night; a time when Panay lived in dread. Shadows were not the only creatures the people of Panay feared, demonic creatures of greed and hunger also came out to seek their prey.

Regina didn’t care for such trivialities; she had other hard-pressed matters to deal with tonight. A whimpering in the room's corner began to annoy her.

“Your highness, please forgive me. I tried. The girl was within my grasp. If it wasn’t for Serilda... ” The Lurer’s whimpering changed to anger. “Had I known Serilda was near the house, I would have been more vigilant. It was in my knowledge that she had left the house.”

“For centuries, we have ruled Panay and its mediocre coven. We have ruled other worlds too. Our ancestors saw to that. The pendant is precious, Mawabi, for reasons that I will not reveal to you. But let me tell you this, if we do not get that pendant, then we are in danger of losing everything. It is something I will not compromise on.”

“But, your highness, the pendant is lost. The girl wasn’t wearing it. Surely, you can see that she doesn’t have it,” said Mawabi.

“The fact that the girl wasn’t wearing it does not eliminate the fact that the pendant is not with her, fool! They have hidden it, but where... ?” Regina paced the floor, her black robes swinging around her. She spun to Mawabi. “You have disappointed me, Mawabi. The girl was needed, and this mistake of yours has cost me time. Time, I don’t have,” Regina said coldly so that even the Shadows shrunk away.

“Don’t do this, please. I beg you. Do not banish me to Cobham. I’ve been your faithful servant, haven’t I? I haven’t let you down. This was my first failing. Please, let me have one more chance, and I won’t disappoint you again.” Mawabi stepped towards Regina but was stopped by the Shadows. “I won’t try to escape, please make the Shadows go away. I can’t bear them!” Mawabi swayed and fell against the wall. She clutched her throat.

“What are you feeling, Mawabi?” asked Regina.

“My throat is on fire. I feel... no, please, not that!”

Regina stood by her rules; one that was, no second chances. With her back to Mawabi now, she continued to stare back into the black liquid in the pot. An image appeared, depicting that evening’s events. The girl was not a skilled witch, that much was obvious. Regina focussed on Pia’s neck; it was empty, as Mawabi had said. Why wasn’t the girl wearing it? Regina’s eyes turned from grey to scarlet.

“Regina... ” Mawabi dared to use the queen’s name. “I beg you. Please spare me.”

“You neglected the use of your powers, to get information about the whereabouts of the pendant. Using such a gift, wasted. This infuriates me,” Regina said in a calm voice, as she turned away from the pot, and faced Mawabi again.

Large crows flew to the window, and perched, cocking their heads. They bore the omen of evil: their scaly wings much like a bat, and their feathers sleek. With beaks long and curved, their eyes were pallid. They looked ominous when tears of pity would fall from their eyes when banishment that was worse than death, was imminent. Mawabi shrieked.

Regina greeted the crows, by throwing them live mice. The crows gathered around the wriggling rodents and pecked at speed. Within a few moments, the cold stone floor was littered with bloody carcasses, and the walls were splattered with blood.

The whimpering began again. Regina sighed; perhaps it was time to end Mawabi’s misery.

Many had perished under her rule, and Regina had shown no remorse. Regretfully, even the gifted ones had to be disposed of; there was no room for second chances. The last remnant of light from the low sun disappeared, leaving nothing but inky blackness. Sharp blood-curdling cries of black mountain dragons transcended. First, their sleek, skeletal bodies would rise into the night air, and look down below for prey. They liked to feast on warm-blooded mortals. Then there were trolls, and orcs, ugly monsters they were, that gave off a smell to make any immortal faint, had they not prepared for the likely intrusion, night after night. Growls, snapping, and long calls were the sounds of the night; the witch tribes never bowed down to chance and secured their homes with charms and spells.

Panay also housed protectors of her world; the mountain wolves. Their warning calls to the evil creatures of the night were fair and strong. Legends on Panay depicted the mighty as wise, and protectors of all things good. These mighty guardians were all white and recognised by two black spots on their nose. Their eyes were the colour of turquoise, the colour associated with all things good in Panay. Other creatures, good and bad, played a part in Panay's history, and today was no different.

Some were in Regina's beckoning, and some resisted. But they would come when she called them. For now, they were free to play. They were not yet needed.

Fire erupted from the pot, casting luminosity on the walls of the tower room. The crows blinked, and the whimpering stopped.

"Regina, please give me one more chance. I'll get the girl, and the boy, I promise. I will finish off what Kraal couldn't," Mawabi cried.

Mawabi was referring to the Lurer, Kraal, who was selected personally to do the job of Taking Max first and then to take the girl, Pia. The boy wasn't important in her plans, but he was in the way. He had to go too. Kraal hadn't prepared well and had failed in her attempt. The sage she had planted near Pia, when the reporters surrounded her, had worked. Pia's magic had weakened, but there had been another witch nearby before her little display of power with the snow, and the green mist... that had been unfortunate... for her.

"No one gets second chances, Mawabi," Regina reminded her servant.

The pot began to bubble now, the liquid inside swirled, becoming faster and faster. A distant buzz from the pot became louder and out flew a swarm of black flies.

A chilling scream rang from Mawabi's mouth, but died in the next second, as the flies enveloped her. A pile of black, torn, rags was all that

was left of the Lurer. Mawabi was banished to Cobham, where her soul would be destroyed over and over again, and where such a thing as forgiveness didn’t exist.

“Clean the mess,” Regina told the Shadows.

With his heart beating hard against his ribcage, Sulo touched the stone. Crepala appeared, and without a sound, they disappeared.

(7)

PIA’S BIRTHDAY

20th December

T he sea foam submerged Pia’s bare feet, back and forth, back and forth it travelled. The freezing, saltwater felt oddly soothing on her toes. She drew a smiley face on the wet, grainy, sand, and then sighed, looking out to sea. It was a typical British winter’s day, with the grey skies and dreary, dull, grey clouds, but she didn’t mind it. Hugging her knees tightly against her chest, Pia brought her chin forward. She wanted to forget that night, that nearly killed her, and the conversation afterwards with Serilda. She knew it was impossible to pretend it didn’t happen, and as much as she would have liked to dismiss it altogether, her mind wouldn’t let her.

The simple life she once knew had gone. It had crashed around her so suddenly that she was blown over by the force. Being a witch, she was told to keep low and never to use magic near humans. She was told that witches had to stay in secret. When she had made friends with Jenna, Angel, and Malaika, she was in a good place. She had actual friends. Yes, she had Fleur to confide things in, but her family were all witches. She needed a human friend, to feel normal and be part of the human world. She had Jenna to thank that for, who didn’t judge her, yet knew what she was. They talked about school, dates with boys, and stayed away from the bizarre. Jenna kept her ‘human’ as much as possible.

The four of them did everything together and hated the long summer holidays when their parents would take them away abroad. Pia never had that chance, to spend time with her mum and dad. She was lonely, but Serilda had made sure she didn't miss out on anything. They went on holiday to France and Spain, and sometimes, to secret beaches, that only witches knew about. Serilda made sure that she and Fleur had time to relax, and have fun, but it was never enough. Pia was careful not to let her aunt know that little piece of information. This year, it was no different. She and her friends were parted for the summer, until now. Finally, September had come round again, and they would be together.

Pia was looking forward to starting the first year of sixth form; it would be the first time she, Jenna, Angel, and Malaika would be in different colleges, following their own individual academic paths. However, they had made a pact to meet often. Pia was glad of that. Looking back now at the good times, her heart ached. She missed them.

She picked up a stone and threw it into the sea. It danced, and skimmed the sea surface for a few yards, and then sunk to the seafloor. Pia had to laugh when she thought of a time when they kept a séance. Pia played it cool and low key. There were no dramas, and nothing happened; only she scared two of her friends by taking the electricity out for a second and claimed it was the ghost and not she. Angel and Malaika screamed, running out of her house as fast as they could. She and Jenna laughed so hard, but Jenna told her off afterward.

"That was mean," she said, holding her stomach as she laughed. "My stomach hurts.

"I couldn't help it," Pia said with tears streaming down her face. "Mine hurts too!" and then they fell about laughing again.

Seagulls cried above Pia, which brought her back to the beach. She saw a dog run to the sea and then back again, chasing some of the birds that landed. The owner whistled to the dog who ran obediently back to its dad. They were leaving the beach. Pia went back to thinking about that night the Lurer had come for her...

“Are you okay?” Fleur had asked. “What was that thing?”

Pia shook her head. “I don’t know, but she wanted to Take me, Fleur. I have never been so scared in my life!”

“Fleur, get yourself and Pia a sweet drink.” Serilda locked the front door behind her using a locking charm and then went to light the fireplace. Golden flames erupted, warming the room instantly. Serilda took place next to Pia and took her hand in hers. “Tell us what happened. I want to know everything, every detail. And... I’ll overlook the fact that you sneaked out.” Serilda winked, which made Pia feel a little better. She was glad her aunt wasn’t mad at her.

Pia took a deep breath. “I saw the same green mist that I saw at the beach, from my bedroom window. I heard Ma call me; she was in trouble. I had to go and save her. But when I got there, this... witch, this Lurer attacked me. I tried to use spells on her to get away, but she was too strong. I was no match.”

“You followed the call of your Ma?” Fleur asked loudly, as she walked in with three hot mugs, which she set down on the table before them. “But Pia, you Ma... ”

“I know, she is dead,” Pia said flatly. “I know I’m being stupid. But I swear, I heard her, and it was so real.”

“How do you know it was your Ma’s voice? It could be someone else,” Fleur said.

“I sometimes still hear my parents. Well, in my mind, anyway. I can never forget how they sound,” said Pia.

Serilda handed Pia her mug of hot chocolate. “Drink this; it will make you feel better. Chocolate is always a healer.”

As the women sat in silence, it began to snow lightly. The fire flickered, making the shadows on the walls dance.

“Pia, can you tell us anything more?” Serilda broke the stillness. “You said the Lurer wanted to Take you, and you know a demon witch is a Lurer. They are the only ones able to Take anyone, yet she didn’t succeed.”

“That was because you rescued me, aunt Serilda. If you hadn’t come in time, I wouldn’t be here.”

“That may be so,” said Serilda matter-of-factly. “But it makes little sense. She was wearing a mask, and she looked oddly familiar. I just can’t put my finger to it.”

“I had seen nothing like her. She had... ” The skeletal face came to the forefront of Pia’s mind. It made her feel sick. “Her face was frightening, like something out of a horror movie.”

“Will you let me into your mind? Will you let me see?” Serilda asked her. Pia nodded. “Then, give me your other hand, darling.”

The fire grew taller and more substantial, candles around the room lit up, as Serilda poured her energy into Pia, dwelling into her mind, and seeing the demon witch. She listened to what they demanded of Pia, and then she let go of her hands. For a moment, she watched Pia’s terrified face. Then, she took her into her arms.

“I am so sorry for you to see that monstrosity, my darling. How dare she reveal herself to you like that, you are only a child!”

“Do you know her?” Pia asked, somewhat comforted by her aunt’s embrace, but curious at her reaction.

“Yes, unfortunately, I do. Her name is Mawabi, one of the most powerful demon witches of Panay. These Lurers work to the beckoning of the Dark Queen Regina,” said Serilda. “So, Mawabi wants a pendant, she needed it, but for what?”

“Ma, who is Queen Regina?” asked Fleur.

“The Lurer told me about her,” said Pia. “She said this queen wanted a pendant I have in my possession. I don’t remember I own one... ”

“Regina is the most influential, cruel, and unforgiving witch of North Panay,” said Serilda, who didn’t elaborate on the pendant. There will be a time to tell Pia about it later. This subject, along with information about Regina was something she didn’t particularly want to talk about right now; there was already enough to worry about. “Girls, it’s getting light outside, and no one has slept. Let’s get some sleep, shall we?”

“Don’t worry about any more attacks; I’m sure nothing will happen today. I’ve put protection charms on this house, I have informed the Elder Witches. They will look after you. Now, go on up, girls. I’ll stay downstairs for a bit.”

Pia and Fleur yawned.

“Goodnight, Ma,” said Fleur, and kissed her Ma on the cheek.

“Goodnight, aunt Serilda.” Pia kissed her on the other cheek, and both climbed the stairs on cumbersome feet, and with heavy eyelids.

A bark brought Pia back to the present again, feeling a little disorientated with the suddenness of change. A golden retriever came over to her, with its tail wagging and eyes twinkling. It was the same dog she saw earlier.

“Looks like she has made a friend,” a man said, as he came up after his dog. He was smiling.

Pia stood up and brushed wet sand grains off her jeans. The man extended his hand. Pia shook it politely. The man looked to be in his mid-twenties, and wore a long, tweed coat, with a scarf around his neck. His brown hair was short, which gave him a good look.

"I'm Michael, and this is Poppy," he said, and bent down to ruffle the top of his dog's head. Poppy barked a hello.

"Hello, Poppy," Pia smiled and stroked the dog's back.

Poppy leaned her head against Pia.

"Well, that's a first. Poppy's never done that before," Michael commented. "Usually, she shies away from people, but with you, she seems... very comfortable. Do you have any pets?"

"No, I don't," said Pia. "I would love one, but my aunt is allergic to pet hair."

"That's a shame. So, you live with your aunt?" Michael asked.

"Yes... " Pia found it odd for a stranger to ask such a personal question. "So, um, do you come here often to the beach? I've never seen you around these parts."

"I'm new here," Michael answered but didn't expand on it. Pia didn't know what he meant. He wasn't paying any attention to her now and was looking into the distance, with his eyes narrowed. He breathed in deeply as if he was taking in the fresh air.

"Is everything okay?" Pia asked. A shiver ran down her spine. She was sure it had nothing to do with the ever-growing wind and cold.

"All is fine. Well, Poppy and I had better get back home. I suggest you do too, Pia. The weather is not our friend today." Michael stated rather abruptly.

Pia was not aware they were on first-name terms, she also detected an edge of uneasiness, perhaps it was her imagination. She must stop analysing

everything! Pulling her hood over her head, she shoved her freezing hands into the pockets of her jacket. It was time to move.

“Well, goodbye then,” she said, but the man was nowhere to be seen. Where did he go? Pia got home just in time before the clouds could unleash their full power. She closed the massive front door behind her as the wind battered outside and walked through the hallway to the lounge.

“Surprise!”

Pia’s heart nearly jumped out of her body as a roomful of people engulfed her with kisses and hugs, shouting Happy Birthday into her ear, especially Fleur. Max kissed her on the lips, making her blush, as some wolf whistled.

“Oh wow, this is so... unexpected. Thank you all,” Pia said, overwhelmed. “Thank you, aunt Serilda.”

“Happy birthday, sister,” said Fleur, beaming. “It was all my idea, you know.”

The crowd departed to make a start on the food and drinks, and her aunt took Pia to the side.

“Fleur and I decided to give you a surprise birthday party since we didn’t celebrate it in June, what with your exams. And, well, with all the things that have happened lately, it would be nice to have some normality around here.”

“This is so unexpected. It’s not even my birthday, but I love it, thank you, aunt Serilda.”

Serilda smiled. “Have a great birthday, honey. I’ll leave you with your friends, who are dying to see you. Fleur, are you coming?”

“Catch you in a bit,” said Fleur, and disappeared into the crowd.

“Wow, Pia, I didn’t know your aunt was a fab party organiser. Just look at what she’s done!” said Jenna, as she, Malaika, and Angel, surrounded her. “Happy birthday!”

“Thanks, guys. It’s so good to see you all!” Pia said sincerely. She had missed them.

“Do you like the theme?” Jenna asked.

“What theme?” Pia asked. It was then that she noticed the trouble her aunt and Fleur had gone through.

The theme of the party was Halloween. Everyone was dressed as storybook witches, demons with horns, werewolves, wizards, and she was sure she saw a gruffalo. That was interesting. All three of her friends were dressed as witches, with a broomstick, and a pointed hat. Pia raised her eyebrows at Jenna.

“Original, isn’t it?” she winked.

“Yes, very,” said Pia.

“I wanted to come as a princess, but they wouldn’t let me.” Jenna sulked.

“Princesses are boring,” commented Malaika.

Jenna put her hands out to her outfit. “It’s just so unlike me.”

“I like it,” said Pia kindly. “Now, are any of you going to tell me about your holiday? I missed you, and I didn’t even get a postcard.” She pretended to be in a mood.

“Oh, I knew I forgot something!” Malaika exclaimed. “Sorry, Pia. I would have called or written to you, but there was some drama at my house. Aunty Mou-Mou came to stay!” Malaika rolled her eyes.

As the friends chatted and laughed, Fleur came up to Pia.

“It’s time to get changed into your party outfit,” she declared.

“And what am I supposed to be?” Pia dared to ask. Not a witch, she whispered in her head, crossing her fingers behind her back.

“I thought it would be a great idea to dress you as a vampire,” said Fleur. “What do you think?”

“Perfect!” said Pia.

Fleur squealed. “I’m so excited! Shall we do the deeds, girls?”

“Lets!” said Angel, taking Pia by the arm, and leading her up the stairs.

Max watched Pia intently as she danced with her girls. He looked for signs of distress, but he couldn’t see any. He took out his phone, and texted, “Now is not the time,” and pressed Send. He walked towards Pia, to claim his turn.

(8)

AZARETH'S DAY

25th December

Pia checked herself in the mirror; she looked all right; she thought. Dressed in a full-length bronze gown, she evaluated herself critically. Did this colour suit her complexion, was the neckline too low? She felt silly wearing traditional witches' clothing, and even sillier when she put her hair in tight curls. She turned her hair to its original colouring, which was silver, and her eyes, emerald. Today, it didn't matter, for today it was a day for witches and warlocks when Azareth Day was celebrated.

To finish her attire, Pia put on a large necklace with embedded sea green crystals, in the shape of a crescent. She then added red flowers to her hair and a piece of head jewellery to her forehead.

"Oh gods of Panay, you look fantastic!" gushed Fleur as she came into Pia's bedroom.

Fleur was dressed in a royal blue, gown, with beautiful silver buttons going all the way down. She wore a head cap, with silver hoops in her earrings.

"You don't look so bad yourself," smiled Pia. "I wish I could go in jeans. Is all this necessary, Fleur? I mean this dress. I'd much prefer modern clothing."

"Oh, don't be so boring. It's Azareth day, dear sis. We get to dress as who we are, and I love wearing period, traditional clothes. People in those days

were so lucky to have all this." Fleur danced around the room, twirling, and pirouetting.

"And those days, witches were also hunted, and killed," Pia reminded her, grimly. "Do you remember the Pendle witches?" The Pendle witches were from Panay originally but were the first families the witch hunters had murdered. The 17th century was a tough time for the witches of Panay.

"Let's not talk about depressing things, Pia. It's time for fun and celebrations. So be happy and enjoy this day." Fleur checked herself in the mirror. Pia laughed as her cousin twirled around yet again. "And there will be a lot of food and drinks too!"

"But you and Pia will only be having soft drinks." The next to come in was Rita, Serilda's best friend and business partner. "Although, maybe a little wine is permitted." She laughed. "Now, are we all ready? The guests will arrive soon, and Serilda is waiting downstairs with Mike. And girls, you look lovely."

"I told you!" mouthed Fleur.

Pia and Fleur followed Rita downstairs, to the magically expanded garden. Old and new families, council members, all began arriving and gathered in the garden. Magical fire-faeries darted around, illuminating the darkening sky, and fire torches hovered throughout the space, warming the guests and their hosts on this freezing evening.

Brass goblets clanked as all greeted one another, forgetting their woes and worries, for another day. Like Pia and Fleur, the witches, wore traditional gowns and robes, hues of blues, greens, and reds. Their heads were covered in old witch jewellery, and their hands adorned with symbols of the ancients. Serilda had worn a blue gown, with silver embroidery running from the top to the bottom, in a V shape. Her hair was intricately

braided with elite flowers, and a webbed hairpiece sat on the crown of her head.

The warlocks were no less extravagant in their dress. They came in long robes, and tall, colourful, hats. Whilst they wore no jewellery, their attire boasted of wealth, power, and magic. They each held a magical staff, as was the tradition.

"Everyone's staring at me," Pia whispered into Fleur's ear.

"That's because you look pretty," Fleur whispered back. "Now, stand tall and smile. Oh look, there's our cousin, from Wales. Let's go and say hi."

Pia couldn't relax. The whispers, the staring, and then looking away, from the other witches, had nothing to do with her dress. She knew it was that incident.

"Pia, are you coming, or not?" Fleur asked.

"Sorry," said Pia. "Yes, I'm coming."

The girls joined their cousin, and soon, Pia forgot about the things that were bothering her.

"Hi, Sam," said Fleur, hugging him. "You look amazing! I can't believe you are here!"

"Hi Fleur, hi Pia," said Sam, smiling. "It's great to see you too. Meet my friend; we go to school together."

Pia and Fleur said hello to Charlie, who then went off to get some drinks.

"Is she your girlfriend?" asked Fleur.

"No, just a human friend," Sam replied. "Don't worry, she knows what we are, and she has promised to keep us a secret. I've reported it to the council; they are aware of this... do you have human friends?"

"We have a few," said Pia. She didn't want Sam to know that Jenna knew about witches. If the council knew, she would be spied on all the time, and she didn't want that.

The torches began to dim, which was a signal that the event was about to start. Everyone quieted down and turned towards their host.

“Thank you all for coming,” Serilda welcomed. “Today is an auspicious day, that had been celebrated throughout the years in the history of witches and warlocks. Today, we celebrate the release of King Azareth, for all those who don’t know,” Serilda looked at the young faces, “he was a powerful kind and loving king of North Panay. His kingdom was diverse and colourful and happy. But when he was taken prisoner by the Merpeople of the Black Sea, that all changed.

“Wars were declared, and food and water were short. Villages died, and Darkness overruled Light. It wasn’t until Queen Janaki’s royal cavalry, with the help of the Spirit Warriors, was King Azareth rescued. He passed the agreement to banish the Merpeople from Panay and to execute the King of the Merpeople. So with that, please come and join me at the table, and enjoy the lovely feast prepared by the infamous Witches’ Cauldron!”

“I’m so hungry; I could eat everything!” exclaimed Fleur.

“I’ve heard of the Witches’ Cauldron. They are supposed to be a great catering company,” commented Sam.

An assortment of coppice, thicket, and foliage was arranged amongst tall, cream coloured candles, along with the long, wooden table. Five, large, copper basins were filled with the purest rose water, found in the magical waterfalls of Yorkshire. All gathered around the table and linked hands.

“We thank the spirits and ghosts,” Serilda led the short prayer, “of the kings and queens of Panay before us, and pray for peace, happiness, and health for the coming year. Auuum.”

“Auuum”, everyone chorused.

Picking up their rose water, filled copper goblets, they toasted one another.

“To King Azareth!” Serilda held up her goblet.

“To King Azareth!”

The feast began. The empty basins filled with more rose water, and copper plates and bowls filled with tender meat, roasted and succulent vegetables, an assortment of exotic fruit, and cheese. Wine filled goblets for the adults and cordial for the younger members of the gathering.

Pia had seemed to have lost her appetite. She picked at her food and moved the meat and vegetables around the plate.

“Why aren’t you eating?” Fleur asked, as she stuffed a piece of a roasted chicken into her mouth.

“I’m just not feeling very hungry, Fleur. I think I’m getting a headache,” Pia replied, her tone sounding flat.

The truth was that she couldn’t stop thinking of her mother’s voice. How was she able to hear it that night? She wished someone could give her answers, but Serilda told her, under no circumstances can the dead come back. So, hearing her mother’s voice was a very clever trick played by the Lurer. Then, the question was, how did the Lurer create it?

Pia helped herself to some grapes and cheese. She could now feel that headache coming on.

“Oh, look, here comes Aradna and Régade, you know, the informers from the council,” Fleur said.

“I know who they are,” Pia said drily. “It’s nice to see them after so long.” She pressed on her temples.

Aradna and Régade stopped by their seats, and both girls stood up.

“Hello, Aradna, hi, Régade,” said Pia politely. “It’s so good to see you.”

Aradna hugged Pia and kissed her forehead. “It’s been a while since I last saw you, and now look at you, so grown up. How are you, Pia?”

“Fine, I guess. I missed you and Régade, too. Why haven’t you visited?” Pia asked.

Aradna and Régade looked at one another, then Régade spoke.

“We had some business we had to look into, and it has taken more time than usual. We are sorry to have missed your birthday, little girl.” Régade touched Pia’s cheek, and then she embraced him. “I hear you have had a good year?” he said when they parted.

“I suppose so, just normal, human stuff,” said Pia. “But I love it. I have good friends and well, what more can I ask for. I also have a lovely cousin who always looks out for me.” Pia smiled at Fleur.

“We heard about that, from your aunt. Fleur, you have done a good thing and in time too, even though you broke a few magical spell laws. These laws protect our community, and it helps not to bring attention from the humans... but we have overlooked that since you were saving two lives,” said Aradna.

“Err, thank you. It wasn’t heroic or anything,” Fleur blurted, turning red in the face. She looked down at her feet.

“I think it was, darling,” said Serilda, as she came by. “Hello, Régade, Aradna, I’m so glad that you came.”

As the three adults began to talk, Pia, and Fleur, walked away to the end of the garden, where it was more secluded. They were soon surrounded by cousins and friends of their own age, and Pia couldn’t see her aunt, Aradna, or Régade anymore.

“We were in South Africa when we heard. Thank you for telling the council,” said Régade.

“This is very worrying, very worrying,” repeated Aradna. “Does Pia suspect anything?”

Serilda shook her head, “Nothing. She hasn’t missed her mother’s pendant at all, which is worrying. Recently, she said heard her mother’s voice.”

“But how can she?” asked Aradna. “She is... ”

“We know she has been Taken, but that does not mean she is... ” began Régade.

“But after all these years, we have found neither Senon nor Marcaria, or any clues. To believe that they could be alive, would be unwise, and to get their hopes up high, would be disastrous,” said Aradna.

“Please, tell me, in your heart, have people who have been Taken, come back?” Serilda asked. “I have asked this question before, and so have many others, is it impossible?”

“My dear Serilda,” said Aradna, and then she sighed. “It may be possible, but it is only a ten percent possibility. Of the few that have returned, they have not been themselves, and are lost. I dare not think of what could have happened to our two friends, Serilda... ”

Serilda nodded her head, solemnly. “I know you are right; I want Pia to be happy. I love her with all my heart, and it hurts me to see her so sad.”

“You have done a great job with both the girls, Serilda,” said Régade. “You should be proud of yourself. We are always, and still looking for answers with the missing witches and warlocks who have been Taken, and our searchers never stop searching.”

“Apart from the encounters with the Lurers, has anything else happened that we should know?” Régade asked.

“I don’t think so... yes, there is one thing. Pia was given a bracelet by her boyfriend, Max. I may go over my head with this, but I don’t know, it’s silly, I know... ” said Serilda.

“Nothing is insignificant; we need to know as much as possible to get the whole picture. We must protect Pia at all costs. You know very well, Serilda, that if Pia were Taken, with the pendant, it would be disastrous. We cannot let that happen,” urged Aradna. “Tell me more about the bracelet.”

“Max gave it to her before he left for New Mexico. He told her to wear it all the time. What could that mean, and why would he ask her to do that?” asked Serilda.

“What did this bracelet look like?” asked Régade, and Serilda described it.

“It sounds like a normal jewellery bracelet to me,” said Aradna. “But it could have been charmed. Is Max a human?”

“Yes,” said Serilda, surprised. But at the pit of her stomach, now she wasn’t so sure.

“Right, tell us about the pendant. You said that Mike was looking into the properties of it, as you are too. Have you found anything that could link in with an explanation, as to why the Lurer wanted the pendant and Pia?” asked Aradna.

Before Serilda could answer, a loud bang was heard, followed with all the torches blown out. The magical fire fairies dimmed out, and an eerie silence befell upon everyone. A scream followed, and the torches lit up again. A witch had fallen to the ground. Régade was the first to reach her; he felt for a pulse.

“She is alive,” he said. “But she must get medical help. Someone, is there anyone here, who is a healer?”

A warlock approached Régade and the fallen witch. “I’m a healer.”

The warlock bent over the witch and performed a spell with his hands. He took some herbs from his bag, and sprinkled it over her body, and placed some on her forehead. He clapped his hands and rubbed them until

white smoke covered her whole. When it dissipated, the witch sat up, her eyes wide in fear.

“I saw it,” she said. “I saw a black panther. It had the brightest green eyes, and it stared at me. I thought I was going to die!” The witch shuddered.

“That is a bad omen!” a warlock in a green hat yelled from somewhere in the crowd. “Margaret, get the children. If we don’t leave now, it will attack us!”

The next minute, there was chaos. Family members pushed people aside, as they tried to find other family members. Small children began to cry, and there was shouting and yelling from all directions. The fireflies zoomed away, alarmed at the sudden turn of events.

“SILENCE!” Régade roared. “SILENCE, PLEASE!” Everyone stopped, and turned to Régade, surprised. “Thank you. Now that I have your attention, I assure you that we will capture this creature. I have sealed this garden, and the house. No creature will be able to get in. I assure you all are safe.

“We will search for this panther, meanwhile, I suggest you stay here for your safety and until further notice. Serilda, and Rita, will stay with you until I can release some news.”

“We can’t stay here,” protested a young warlock. “Not when a panther is prowling the streets. I want to volunteer to help the search.”

“I would like to as well,” said a witch who looked to be in her early teens.

“And me too,” said another man.

“Very well, we can do with more help,” Régade said. “Aradna, you know what to do.”

Aradna nodded a yes. “Councillors and volunteers, please come with me.”

When the little group gathered, they followed Régade to the bottom of the garden, where he tapped his arm. The others did the same, and they vanished.

Aradna wasted no time and directed her spells towards the garden and the house exit, then above the whole community, preventing anyone from leaving or anyone entering the house.

“Please, carry on with the feast,” Serilda said in a loud voice, although her insides were churning for a reason she didn’t know. She must have Pia, and Fleur with her... where were they?

“Rita, have you seen the girls?” she asked.

“I haven’t seen them anywhere,” replied Rita. “The last time I saw them was when Aradna and Régade were talking to them.”

“Oh, God.” Serilda ran to Aradna, “The girls are not here, they must have been taken by the panther! I have a terrible feeling about this; we have to find them before it gets too late!”

“They must be here somewhere,” Aradna tried to calm her friend down, “But for your peace of mind, we’ll do a search.”

Serilda began to cry.

*

“Max, where are you taking us?” Pia asked, as Max tore down the narrow country road, twisting and turning around sharp corners, and nearly missing a rather large animal. Fleur and Pia screamed.

Fleur gripped the car handles. “I don’t want to die so young, Max. Please, slow down.”

But Max wasn’t listening or slowing down.

(9)

THE BLACK PANTHER

Pia was rudely awoken by someone shaking her shoulders, and the dream of her date with Max ended abruptly.

“Pia!” she heard a faint, but frantic, whisper.

“Pia!” was said more urgently the second time.

She groaned, her whole body seemed to ache, and why was there movement? She opened her eyes a fraction, feeling sleep-deprived, and saw Fleur’s face up close.

“Pia!”

“Fleur? What is it?” Why was Fleur torturing her? And then she remembered something vague... the allure of something sweet in her senses, the torches going out at the party, a pair of bright, green eyes... and then nothing.

“Fleur!” Pia grabbed her cousin’s arm. She was wide awake now. “What’s happening? Where are we?”

“I don’t know, but I’m scared. Max has turned into a madman! He is at the wheel, and I think he is trying to kill us!”

“What?” Pia shouted, now alert. “Did I fall asleep?”

“Not asleep, but it seemed like you were drugged. You weren’t out for long, just ten minutes or so,” said Fleur.

“Did you fall into a deep sleep too?” Pia asked, feeling silly.

“For some reason, the vapour didn’t affect me at all,” said Fleur. “It’s strange.”

What vapour, Pia wanted to ask, but Max spoke then.

“Why are you doing this to us, Max? What did you do to me? Stop this car now!” screamed Pia.

“I’m sorry I can’t do that. We’re in a rush,” he responded.

“See, I knew he was a serial killer!” Fleur whispered harshly as Max continued to race down the pitch-black lane. “Where are you taking us?” she dared to ask.

Pia tried to see something outside the window, anything – a landmark, a sign, anything – but the car was going too fast, and any light that she could see such as headlights of passing cars, did nothing to tell her where they were.

“I’m sorry to do this to you both,” Max spoke after a while. “I had no choice. Please, keep calm. I will not hurt any of you. I need you to trust me.”

“You promise that you won’t hurt us?” Fleur scoffed. She was holding on to Pia’s hand for dear life making Pia’s fingers go numb.

“Fleur, can you stop squeezing the life out of my hand, please?”

“Oh! I’m so sorry, Pia. But I’m so scared!” Fleur lessened her grip but didn’t let go of Pia’s hand. “Max, do you think you go a little slower? I mean, what’s the rush? No one is following us.”

“No, I can’t. We must reach before midnight,” Max said, closing the conversation, giving them a sign that the conversation is closed.

Pia put a finger to her lips and looked at Fleur. She shook her head; ask no more questions. She thought back to the party when the torches blew out. She had felt a strange presence, and then she saw a pair of bright, green eyes looking up at her. They were the same colour as her eyes. She didn’t remember much after that. When she woke up, she was in the back of the

car, with Fleur, and Max was in the driver's seat. The way he drove, it was like he was possessed.

She was terrified of his behaviour. In the short time she had known him, he had never behaved like this, with anyone. He was kind, attentive, and he cared. But now, he seemed like someone she didn't know, like he was a stranger. She didn't like this side of Max at all. Pia's mind raced back to the party, and to everyone there. What must they be thinking? What about aunt Serilda? She must be out of her mind with worry!

"Fleur, I'm calling in on aunt Serilda. I'm channelling you in, don't make any sudden movements and don't make a sound. Otherwise, Max will know we are trying to contact someone," Pia communicated with Fleur, through telepathy.

"Okay," Fleur mouthed silently.

They both closed their eyes and concentrated on opening up a communication channel. The sound of the car, the noise of the friction of car wheels against rough asphalt, all drowned out, as Pia and Fleur's energy connected. Colours of blue, red, and green exploded in the blackness, and Serilda's worried face came into sharp focus. Pia saw the guests sitting around the table, some standing in the far corners of the garden, sipping a drink, slowly. They looked subdued and nervous.

"Aunt Serilda, it's me. I'm here with Fleur," Pia said.

"Where are you two? I'm so worried!" Serilda answered in an instant. "Régade and some councillors are out looking for you. Tell me where you are!"

"Ma, we are safe, and we are with Max," spoke Fleur. "I don't-"

"Aunt Serilda, we are fine. Max is looking after us," Pia cut her cousin off. "He is taking us to a safe place. I'll speak to you again soon, don't worry."

Pia disconnected before Fleur could say anything else, and then she blocked her aunt's attempt to connect with them again. Perhaps that was the worst thing she could do, but she had to know what Max's plan was with them, and she had to find out where they were going before she could give her aunt any more to go on. She just hoped that Régade could track the car.

"You know, you two are brilliant... witches," Max said slyly.

"What?" Pia and Fleur said together. They looked at one another, alarmed.

"You are telling your aunt that you are safe, that's a good call, and smart that you didn't tell her anything else. There was a reason I didn't tell you where we are headed; we don't want any witch councillors following our tails, do we?" Max seemed to laugh at his own joke. "I mean, that would just sabotage this whole operation."

"You are making no sense. What are you up to?" Pia asked.

Max stopped the car and cut the engine, and then turned to face the girls. Pia and Fleur gasped. Max's blue eyes turned emerald, and his hair became a shade of black mixed with blue. His features became sharper, and he looked more beautiful than he should. Max unlocked the door and stepped out.

"I'm not meant to show you this, but the shock of what you will learn will be far greater when we get there. Please, don't be afraid, and follow me," he said.

"What do you mean? What are you talking about? Isn't you turning weird shocking enough?" Fleur exclaimed.

Pia was curious. Max morphing into whatever he was – for he wasn't human, she regretted admitting – wanted to know exactly what he was and where he was taking them. She opened the car door.

“Pia are you mad! Just look at him, he could be a supernatural serial killer, for all we know. He could lure us to our deaths!” Fleur took Pia’s arm, trying to stop her from getting out of the car. Pia shook her cousin off of her.

“It’s fine, Fleur. I’m sure he won’t try to kill us,” she said, although within herself, she doubted her decision.

Was it the right thing to do? They had the chance of locking the doors and getting the hell out of there! Max had left the keys in the ignition. She could drive home. But wasn’t the fact that he didn’t take the keys, proof enough he didn’t want to cause them any harm?

“Look, I’m going. Are you coming?” Pia asked.

“I haven’t got all day,” Max called from somewhere in the darkness.

Pia looked towards the trees, where she saw Max’s emerald eyes reflecting at her. Pia nearly lost her footing, and almost fell, but Fleur caught her.

“Are you all right?” she asked, checking Pia’s eyes, and any other signs of disorientation.

“I’m fine. Stop that!” Pia waved Fleur’s fingers from her face and dusted herself down. “Max is that way, come on.”

The girls ambled towards the woods. When they reached the place where Max was standing, he walked away. The girls could do nothing but follow him. The car headlights flickered and then died.

“Great! How are we supposed to get home now? The car battery seems to have died!” moaned Fleur.

“Shhh, keep an eye on Max. We don’t want to lose him,” said Pia.

“Well, I can’t see a thing. How am I supposed to keep an eye on him?” Fleur huffed. Pia rolled her eyes.

“You are now entering my territory,” Max spoke. “Here, you won’t need artificial light, for illumination will be provided by nature.”

“What do you... oh wow!” Fleur exclaimed.

Before them, the woodland became alive with colours. The trees were no longer dull brown but were the colour of fluorescent green. Its branches and leaves waved lazily in reds and yellows, and the ground illuminated to show them a pathway that brought them to a bridge, where a multicolour river flowed.

“I can’t believe what I see,” Pia whispered. “This is amazing... ”

“Stay where you are, and I will show you my true form. Don’t be scared, I will not hurt you,” said Max.

Max walked to the other end of the bridge, and then he began to change. He grew shorter, and his clothes disappeared, to be replaced by black, silk-like hair. His face changed shape. Standing before Pia, and Fleur, was now a black panther.

Fleur screamed, and Pia held tight onto her cousin.

Telepathy is a gift given to us, Max communicated, looking straight at the girls. *We are a community of shapeshifters, and we protect the Earth and the World of Panay.*

“What is your real name?” Pia asked.

“I am Maxwell Hinder, a Spirit Warrior from Panay, a shapeshifter. I am descended from the Tribal Spirit families. My tribe know about you, Pia. You are special. I have a duty to look after you.”

“What about Fleur?” asked Pia. *“Surely, whatever I need protecting from, Fleur does too. There must be a reason you brought her here as well, and where are you taking us?”*

“You are coming back with me to my village. That’s all I can tell you for now.”

“I’ve never heard of such a place,” said Fleur. *“You said you are from a tribe. Are there many like you?”*

Pia could detect her cousin’s curiosity now. She seemed to feel a little braver.

“We all have our own personalities, our own strengths and skills, but yes there are more shapeshifters like me,” Max said. *Then, he looked at Pia’s empty wrist. “Where is that bracelet I gave to you?”*

“I lost it,” Pia said in a faint voice, feeling embarrassed.

“*Never mind. We shall get you another one*,” said Max. *“You must follow me; we will walk the rest of the way. But first, let’s drink nourishment from the trees they offer.”*

The trees lowered their branches and dropped nectar from their leaves into the panther’s mouth. The girls put their hands together and drank from it like a bowl. It was refreshing, and Pia instantly felt the effects of it, as the nectar slid down her throat. She felt alive and full of energy.

“This is better than the power drinks we have at home!” exclaimed Fleur. Pia chuckled.

They all walked through the woods, not feeling tired at all, with Max still in his panther avatar.

Max didn’t talk on the way to his village. He needed to plan on what he would say to Malarakin. He hadn’t intended to reveal his identity to the girls this soon, but he didn’t want Pia to be frightened of what lay ahead for her. He also had the lost bracelet to deal with now.

He couldn’t deny the fact that it disappointed him it was lost, for, without it, Pia was unprotected from those witches. He was a new shapeshifter, and so had not yet gained enough experience to fight against Lurers, or other

creatures. He was still in training. Looking back, he was lucky to have been rescued by the good witches, when the Lurer took him.

His instructions were to keep Pia safe from Lurers, and that was all. Now, he had Fleur to deal with as well. His brother, Remnick, had helped put the girls in the car.

“You are learning well, little brother,” Remnick congratulated Max when he blew the torches out by a single puff. “This avatar suits you.”

“Thanks, Remnick,” Max had communicated with his mind.

“Now remember, when you change back to your human form, be vigilant. No one must see you. You must not reveal your true self to the witches. Wait for when you reach the Creek.”

But Max had broken that promise, and he would have to face the wrath. The village wasn’t far now, and Max would soon be home, a place in deep Yorkshire hidden from the human world, and from witches.

Darkness fell away, allowing a bright sun to take its place. An eagle circled the group above, swooping and turning, and then flying high again. It eventually landed and turned into a man.

“Welcome home, brother,” he said. “Hello, Pia. Hello Fleur.”

The eagle-man went on one knee and bowed to Pia. She gasped.

(10)

ADISA VILLAGE

“What are you doing?” Pia stepped back when the strange eagle man went down on one knee and bowed, and when Max joined the man, she became alarmed.

“Welcome to Adisa, *binti mfalme,* Pia,” said the eagle man who was still bowing.

“Please, stop bowing. You too, Max,” Pia protested. “And what is a *binti mfalme*?”

“It means princess, in our native language, Swahili, you are royalty.” Max stood up. “This is my brother, Remnick.”

“Swahili is an African language,” Fleur pointed out.

“Yes and no,” replied Remnick. “It is an ancient language, originated from our ancestors, who settled in Africa in the 1700s. Over the centuries, it also became the language of the locals.”

“I didn’t know that,” said Fleur.

“I’m sure many people don’t know that, Fleur,” said Pia. “Anyway, I can assure you, Max, and Remnick, I am no princess, I am just an ordinary person.”

“Or an ordinary witch,” said Fleur. Pia lifted her eyebrows at that comment. “Well, you’re not a human, are you?”

Remnick seemed to scrutinise Fleur. “You too, are very important in Pia’s present and immediate future. I advise you stay with her at all times,” he said mysteriously. “But, now, please follow us to the village. You must eat, drink, and rest.”

Pia shrugged when Fleur gave her a quizzing look and followed the brothers.

The small group of four trudged through the woods, and the night turned into day. Small animals dashed from tree to tree, and a chorus of singing birds brought the place alive. The illuminations had dimmed now, but Pia was sure when night came back again, the light show would begin. She would love to see them again.

They soon came to an opening. Pia saw huts made of straw and mud, dotted around a flat, lush green field. Small vegetable and flower gardens marked the huts as their own, and each patch was different. Where one grew sunflowers and red vegetables, another grew beetroot, purple and white flowers, and white vegetables such as cauliflower and cabbage. Large pots bubbled away as the people cooked, the delicious aroma filling the air. Pia's stomach grumbled. Did she see Max smirk?

As Pia walked by, the villagers stopped their work and bowed. The children stopped playing and followed their elders. Pia felt awkward.

"Do... ?" she began to ask when a soft nod from Max confirmed the answer.

"You are a princess here, Pia. Everyone knows your history," he said. "You will get used to it."

"I don't want to get used to it," Pia said through gritted teeth.

Pia couldn't stop noticing how simple people wore their clothes here. The men wore long, free-flowing shirts and loose-fitting trousers, and the women were clothed in dresses that reached the ankle, and that were modest from the neck down. Some also wore caps.

"The fabric seems to be of cotton, with no modern-day styles," Fleur said aloud. "Wouldn't it be great if we could introduce these clothes to Ma? It

would make Azareth Day so much more authentic, and not mention, historical!”

“Planning another party, then?” Pia said. “Fleur, we are not here for a history tour, and aunt Serilda must be worried out of her mind about us!”

“I’ve heard of Azareth day,” said Max. “Is that what that party was about?”

“Instead of kidnapping us, you could have stayed, and then you would have known.” Fleur’s scorn was reproachful, and then it changed into curiosity. “So, why do your people dress like that? I mean, shouldn’t they be wearing jeans?”

“In our native villages, shapeshifters only wear plain clothes of cotton, and will only use natural fibres. If we were to stay in the city, we would wear clothes from the present era, as to not attract onlookers or the media,” Max explained.

“Oh,” said Fleur.

“I’m not offended, don’t be worried,” Max said dismissively. “It’s natural to be curious.”

Pia stopped at some beautiful red and yellow flowers and sniffed at the scent. She bent to touch it when someone came running to her.

“You must not touch the flowers, princess!” the woman said. She was old, but she was agile in her movement.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Pia retracted her hand and straightened up quickly, she was a foot taller than the woman was.

“I shouldn’t have said that so harshly, I’m sorry, princess. These flowers are precious, they make medicine and must not be touched by skin,” the woman said, her tone a little softer now.

Pia was astounded and surprised but waived the apology aside. “Please, don’t apologise, it’s okay.”

Remnick came around to the woman and put an arm around her small shoulders. “This is Niamh, one of our medicine makers, and one of the elder shapeshifters. She is 320 years old, you know, and she is still as tough as old boots, as the humans say.”

Niamh hugged Remnick around the waist, which was the highest she could reach. “You are not so young yourself,” she said.

“How old are you, Remnick?” asked Pia.

“Just around a hundred,” laughed Max. “Before you ask, I am only nineteen, in human and in shapeshifter worlds.”

Fleur gave Pia a sly smile and winked.

“Shut up, Fleur,” said Pia, making Fleur burst into laughter.

“Oh, I’m only teasing.” Fleur wiped a tear from her eye. “But I’m not wrong, am I?”

Pia pushed past Fleur in a huff, and then stopped, as no one was moving.

“Why are you all standing there?” she asked.

“We have arrived at the hut where you, and your cousin will rest.” Remnick gestured the girls to enter the hut, and then he and Max followed them.

The hut on the inside was not what Pia expected. It was quite spacious inside. The hut was divided into two sections; one was a kitchen and the other was a living room/bedroom where at least six people could sleep. Instead of beds, there were hammocks. A single wooden table against one wall, and a sideboard on the other. The hammocks took residence in the middle, forming a circle, and circular bookcases lined the walls all around the hut.

The kitchen was basic, with a sink and an utensils and pots cabinet. A string hung from one wall to the other, where large banana leaves hung. She questioned Max about it.

“We eat our food on these leaves, and then we wash it to be used again until the leaves begin to disintegrate. We believe in using natural resources than using glassware for eating purposes. For bowls, it will be coconut shells. I suppose you could say we live frugally, but it is a way of preserving the environment in its natural form and a way of giving back to nature,” Max explained.

A girl who seemed to be the age of twenty, entered the hut and bowed to Pia.

“Please, your highnesses, come and eat. Then, you can rest,” she said in a silky soft voice. She was slim and had the most beautiful dark eyes. Her dark hair framed her face, that made her look exotic. “Please follow me to the next hut where the food has been prepared.”

The girl gestured the group to follow her. The next hut was much bigger, and it seemed this one was for cooking and eating only. It resembled a rather large hall, but circular. Foods of all varieties were displayed on a three-level step. On one side, there was fruit, a good selection of bread and cheeses, nuts, and on the other side, there was cooked meats, fish, rice, and vegetables.

Remnick turned to Pia, “We’ll see you again soon. Please enjoy the refreshments. Come brother, we have work to attend to.”

“Wait! Where are you going?” Pia shot the question at Remnick, but he had already left the hut with Max.

The girl, Aura, watched Pia for a moment, and then spoke,

“No one will harm you here, your highness. However, I cannot lie to you and say everything is fine. I am not supposed to discuss anything with you just yet, not until you have eaten and had some rest. Please be assured that you are safe here. Please, eat.”

Aura's tone made Pia feel strangely reassured and safe. Fleur had already plated up with everything on offer and had sat down to eat. Pia sighed silently. Perhaps she was reading too much into all this. Pia's stomach grumbled. Admitting that she won't get any answers just yet, she helped herself to a feta salad, bread, cheese, and pomegranate. As she ate, she felt better and decided she would get the answers later.

Aura watched Pia, and Fleur eat. They were very young, and she wondered if they could handle what lay ahead of them. She determined Pia was quite head-strong, but she was weak, emotionally and physically. Her heart ached because of losing her family, and she relied on the love of her aunt and cousin. Physically, she was not yet in the right form to battle, but that could be fixed. Her cousin, Fleur, looked ready for a challenge, although a little aloof. Unlike Pia, nothing bothered her. She kept watching the girls, and to her satisfaction, they began to yawn.

"I am feeling so tired," Fleur yawned again. "Thank you so much, Aura. I loved the food... but could I go to sleep, just for a little while?"

"You may," smiled Aura. "You too, Pia. The beds are ready for you in your hut. I'll wake you up in as little as a few hours."

Aura led the girls to their hut, where they crashed instantly. And now, she needed to learn as much as she could from their memories. She had a duty to fulfil. Aura checked the windows to make sure no one was too close, and then she went to her cupboard where she took out an instrument that looked like a syringe with two soft attachments on either side.

She attached one side of the syringe to herself, and the other side to Pia's head, and turned a dial on the instrument. It began to whirr, and moments later, Aura was watching Pia's life from the time of her birth to her parent's disappearance, her aunt taking her in, Pia playing with Fleur... the

graveside, Max, the witches' Lure to the cottage, and the witch that nearly took her... but she couldn't see the blue crystal pendant anywhere in Pia's memory.

Frustrated, Aura went through the memory again like a rewound tape, but there was nothing that she could see. Aura heard the front door open, and hastily detached the equipment, just as Max walked in.

"Oh hello, Maxwell. Did you want anything?" Aura asked, trying to look innocent.

Max looked suspiciously at her. "I just came to see if everything was alright," he said. He glanced at Pia who seemed soundly asleep. Then, he looked at Aura.

"As you can see, everything is fine here," said Aura, hoping her face didn't give away anything. She knew Max's perception of people was very sharp, and he could smell problems from a mile away. Then, she saw the way he was looking at Pia, and she knew what was happening.

"Pia is a princess; you do know that, don't you?" Aura said, coming up to Max. Like Max, she was also a young shapeshifter and had suited herself to Max already. "Love is not an option here, my friend."

Max's face coloured red. He coughed. "Who told you I love Pia?"

"People and creatures talk," Aura said. She circled Max like a predator circling its prey. "I'll tell you what, I'll keep it my secret. I won't tell... but I ask one thing from you."

Max felt his body heat up in anger. "Don't play your silly little games with me, Aura. What do you want?"

"I'll tell you what; I'll keep it my secret. I won't tell... but I ask one thing from you."

Max felt his body heat up in anger. "Don't play your silly little games with me, Aura. What do you want?"

“I only ask that you go out with me on one date. We can have fun; it doesn’t always have to be work,” she said, taking his hand, and then twirling herself around him.

Max dropped her hand and scowled. “Stop it, Aura. You know I don’t have feelings for you like that. You are just a friend to me.”

“Well, what a shame that is,” she said.

“Are you threatening me?” Max challenged her, looking straight at her. He trembled and shook. His eyes turned emerald, and his skin began to grow black fur.

“Max, that is not a good idea. Relax, I didn’t mean it... ” Aura backed towards the door.

The black panther snarled and snapped its teeth. “Max, don’t make me change. I can take you on!”

The panther advanced slowly towards her, his shoulders hunched and calculated. Aura wasted no time and shape-shifted into a tigress. She launched herself onto Max with a loud growl. She scratched Max’s face with her knife-sharp claws, and he returned by damaging her back. Aura leapt back in a howl but didn’t stay down long.

She leapt onto Max, and they rolled towards the door, paws and teeth everywhere. They found themselves outside and began to circle one another.

“You are being stupid, Max!” she growled.

“You stepped out of line, Aura,” Max’s eyes were livid. “How dare you accuse me of…”

“Go on, say it. I dare you!” Aura’s eyes were laughing.

“Grrrrrr!” Max leapt at her with the power of a real hunter, but Aura moved aside, just missing his claws.

The village had gathered to watch the spectacle, which was a frequent event between the two. The children loved it, and cheered the fight on, whereas the adults watched in amusement. No one tried to stop them. They knew it would stop when one of them gets tired, and they will be friends again.

Aura sensed two specific people watching them. Max also turned to see what Aura was looking at, and there stood, at the door of the hut they left, Pia, and Fleur, with their faces a picture of astonishment, and terror.

Max, embarrassed, walked away, and wandered into the woods, with Aura walking the other way, her tail swinging merrily.

“Well, welcome to Adisa Village, I’m so glad you got to see that. Although it is a recurring
event,” a tall man with a large belly, laughed, as he stood where the two cats were fighting one another, just a few moments ago. “I am Chief Malarakin, welcome.”

(11)

THE BIRTH OF THE FIRE WITCH

“Come, take a walk with me,” said the man dressed fantastically in a long tunic, with a fabric belt around his waist. He wore sandals instead of boots, and Pia loved his long, plaited hair, that hung to his waist. To complete his look, he wore a headpiece that resembled the ones the red Indians wore back in the day. She had seen a picture in one of their old books on witch history.

“It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?” Malarakin commented.

He began walking through the village, and towards the open fields. It was the first time that Pia noticed the sunny sky and felt the warmth that was radiating from the unusual, red, sun. It was meant to be winter. The girls ran to catch up with the man, who strode with his hands behind his back, straight and powerful.

Pia already liked him. His lined face showed wisdom and knowledge and his rough hands showed hard work, but his arms showed something else... were they battle scars?

“I am the village Chief. We go on first names here,” Malarakin said. “I believe it brings respect and honesty, and a certain amount of family closeness. We are all a big family.”

“Do you shapeshift too?” asked Fleur.

“Oh, you are bold to ask that question so soon,” said Malarakin. “But to answer your question, yes, I did a long time ago when it was needed, but not anymore... things have been on the quiet side lately. And to answer your next question, my avatar was a phoenix.”

“A phoenix? Wow, that’s amazing!” said Fleur.

“Yes, amazing,” Pia, said, in awe.

Pia and Fleur couldn’t help watching the people go about their daily duties, as they passed them by. Domestic work like washing clothes, and hanging them on lines to dry, was done the old, traditional way when there were no washing machines or dryers. The sun beating down on the wet clothes seemed soothing the eye. Small children frequently changed into their avatars, which they seemed to enjoy. To Pia’s relief, they changed into kittens or puppies, but there were the ones that dared to turn into snakes, or giant spiders, terrorising their siblings and friends.

“Rogue, turn back again this instant!” A mother came running after her daughter with a rolling pin. The girl had changed into a cobra, and slithered after her younger sister, nipping at her ankles. The little girl trembled behind her mother, and the older child transformed back into herself, laughing.

“That wasn’t funny, Rogue!” the little sister shouted as loud as her squeaky voice would allow.

“Well, you started it, Snow!” Rogue retorted. “Ma, she called me a slow sloth, so I thought I would show her what a speedy snake could do!”

“Right, I have had enough of this. Rogue, inside now and wash those dishes. Snow, you go and play with your brothers.” As Snow ran off, happy that she wasn’t being punished, Pia heard the woman mutter, “Why can’t the girls just get on!”

Malarakin’s laugh boomed in Pia’s ear, startling her. “I remember once when I used to terrorise my brother, Husk. And like Rogue, I got told off also, far too often!”

“Pia and I have never had sibling rivalry,” said Fleur. “I don’t think we ever fought. We have had arguments, sure, but she never cast a spell on me

to hurt me."

Malarakin looked from Pia to Fleur.

"I see something special, an extraordinary bond that you two share," Malarakin said, but he didn't elaborate. It felt like he was struggling to hide something, and Pia wondered what it could be.

They reached the end of the village and walked through a gate, that was the entrance to the field. Malarakin and the girls walked up the hill, to the centre where a lone, beautiful, grand old tree stood majestically.

"Malarakin!" someone shouted from down the hill. "Malarakin!"

"Seems like I am needed," said Malarakin. "Please excuse me for a moment, girls. I won't be long," he said, and half ran, half walked back towards the village. He was also limping; did he do that before? Pia didn't recall.

"I'm feeling so hot, let's sit under the tree in the shade for a while until the Chief comes back. I wonder what he wanted to talk to us about, that couldn't be done at the village," Pia mused.

She and Fleur sat down on a patch of grass and began picking at the blades. Pia relaxed her head on the tree trunk and let the breeze wash over her face. It felt good.

"Do you know, the chief hasn't told us yet why we are here, he talks about everything else, but seems to avoid telling us the truth," commented Fleur. "And why is it summer here and not winter? It's messing me up, and it feels so surreal here."

"I'm sure he will tell us soon," said Pia, always the optimist. "Besides, I don't I want to think about anything right now. I'm enjoying the moment, because I know that as soon as he tells us the truth, all this loveliness will disappear, and we will be back in our sorry little lives, in the cold, and life would be normal again."

“Not exactly normal, is it Pia? Are you forgetting about the Lurer that tried to kill you, or that Max is not a human, but a shapeshifter? We thought shapeshifters were myths!” Fleur said. “I mean, all this is very nice, yes, but it is also so weird. I, for one, can’t wait to get home. I miss Yorkshire. Hey, where exactly do you think we are?”

“I was thinking about that too,” said Pia. “This could be a part of Yorkshire we don’t know.”

“That’s unlikely,” commented Fleur.

Pia closed her eyes and thought of what was happening at home. Was aunt Serilda, okay? Were they all looking for her and Fleur? She wished she was here with them now; she needed reassurance that everything was okay in this bizarre land. She wanted to be at home with her family. Perhaps she could try telepathy again.

Her mind closed the present, and she thought of her aunt and pictured her face. A hum vibrated in her head, but nothing happened. Instead of connecting with her aunt, Pia felt an authoritative energy enter her body, a vibrant heat source. It was making her feel sick. Pia put her head against her knees and breathed deeply. She heard a faint voice, which then grew louder.

“PIA, RUN!”

“What?” Pia mumbled.

“RUN, PIA!”

Pia’s eyes flew open, to see a black panther in front of her. It looked ready to pounce. She jumped up, and Fleur hid behind her.

“... Max, is that you?” Fleur’s voice trembled.

Pia shielded her cousin as they backed up, slowly. The panther growled, and stepped forward, baring its teeth. This wasn’t Max; he wouldn’t do this. Then, the panther lunged.

“NO!” Pia shouted. Her shout seemed to bounce high and far, into the corners of the field.

She threw two fireballs at the animal in quick succession, which struck it mid-air. The panther was blasted two feet away from them. Pia threw two more fireballs at it, creating a blazing fire cage. The panther’s surprise was apparent, and its growl was louder. It paced the ground it was trapped in.

“How on earth did you do that?” Fleur exclaimed as a man and a woman came running towards them, along with Malarakin.

“I don’t know,” Pia said, her eyes full of astonishment. “I’ve never done that before.”

“Let me look at your hands.” The woman took Pia’s hands and pressed at certain points. Sparks that had never been there before flared and died. Pia could feel a powerful heat within herself that she couldn’t explain.

“Are we going to get any answers now?” Fleur asked.

“Fleur?” said Pia. “... I’m not feeling too well.”

“Malarakin, we need to get her back to the village, quickly!” the woman said. “That spell was too powerful for her; she wasn’t ready!”

“I’ll take care of that, scoundrel!” said the man, darkly. “How did he even enter the grounds?”

“Careful, Aleron. Semblance is cunning, and he won’t stop at hoodwinking you,” said Malarakin.

Aleron transformed into a wolf, twice the size of the panther. Asha whispered a spell, and the cage disappeared, freeing the animal. It didn’t run but growled at the wolf. Then, it sprinted into the woods on the far side of the field. The wolf sprinted after it, close at its heels.

“The darkness, Fleur, it’s coming for me... ”

Malarakin grabbed Pia before her head hit the ground.

*

“The power overwhelmed her.” Pia heard someone say. She kept her eyes closed; she wanted to hear more.

She wondered if Fleur was with them. She couldn’t feel her presence, which she usually could. There seemed to be a man and a woman, but she couldn’t distinguish the woman. She felt a familiarity from the man; she had come across him before, and his scent... it was one she knew.

“The constellations are in line and transports the power of the sun into her as we speak. She will have to learn control and practice discipline,” the man seemed to say this with profound thought. “She will need special training.”

“So, the new generation of the Fire Witch has finally ascended,” the woman said. “And about time too.”

A new generation? What were they talking about, and what was a fire witch?

“What about the other girl?” the woman asked. “Can she be trusted?”

So, she was right. Fleur wasn’t in the room, then, where was she?

“I couldn’t detect anything untrustworthy of her,” the woman replied. “She wanted to know if her cousin would be all right, and I have reassured her that Pia will be fine once the healing sets in.” There was a long pause, and then the woman spoke again. “It’s been three hours since she fell... ”

“How much of the herb was given to her?” the man asked.

“Enough to align her base chakras, and to rejuvenate her natural magic, although I see her new magic working too. That is good. With the power of the fire flowing in her young veins, Pia will be able to fight and protect herself. We will have to be patient, Michael.”

Michael? Where had she heard that name before? Pia searched her mind frantically, trying to unscramble her confusion of images and events. Could this be the same Michael she met at the beach?

“Malarakin isn’t happy, you know,” Michael interrupted her thoughts. “He is livid. Semblance has some explaining to do. Why did he attack the girls?”

“I don’t believe it was both of them he was trying to hurt,” the woman said. “He was after the princess.”

“But that makes little sense. Why would Semblance do such a thing?”

“Michael, were you able to read his mind when you went after him?”

“I’m afraid not,” sighed Michael. “Semblance’s power to block telepathy is extreme. I couldn’t break through.”

The conversation seemed to stop then, and Pia was disappointed.

“... It looks like the princess is still in the healing process; she won’t wake soon,” the woman said. “I don’t know about you, Michael, but I need a strong brew!”

“I do too!” Michael exclaimed. “I’ll tell Aura to keep an eye on the princess.”

As soon as Michael and the woman left, Pia got up from the bed. She tried to make sense of what she heard. First, there was that panther, Semblance. Why would he want to kill her, and what was his motive? They were talking about a new generation of fire witches...

Pia scrutinised her palms. Fire fizzled on the lines of her palms, but it didn’t hurt. She assessed herself, and she felt powerful, stronger, and full of energy that she hadn’t felt before.

“You’re awake, thank God!” Fleur rushed towards her and crushed her with an enormous hug. “Are you okay? You terrified me! And that fire

thing you did, it was terrific. It was like you were some super-witch or something!”

“I feel better,” smiled Pia. “Where did you come from?” Pia walked around the hut. “Fleur, when I fell, what happened after that, and how did I get here?”

“Malarakin brought you here,” Fleur said. “They put a few drops of some medicine in your mouth and then let you sleep. I wasn’t allowed to stay; they said it would be very traumatic for me to see you like this.

“They took me to a quaint little garden; it was lovely there. Do you know they have apple, orange, and lemon trees too? I had to pick an orange, and it had the sweetest nectar I have ever tasted!”

“Fleur... ” Pia gave her cousin an impatient glare.

“... And I am going off on a tangent, sorry,” apologised Fleur. “Anyway, I had to see you, and when I saw Michael, and Niamh, walk out of here, I made my move.”

“Wait, Michael... he was the one I met at the beach, and Niamh was the woman. She is the medicine maker. The one we met early this morning?”

“I suppose so,” said Fleur, “Why?”

Pia told Fleur what she overheard.

“They think you are a Fire Witch?” Fleur was in obvious awe. “Wait, what is a Fire Witch?”

“Fleur, listen to me. If they were referring to me as the Fire Witch, what does that mean? What do these shapeshifters want from us, and why haven’t we been sent home yet? Aunt Serilda will be out of her mind with worry!” Pia said.

“You know, I was thinking about Ma when you were out or asleep, whichever. I tried to speak to her telepathically, but I couldn’t get through. I got nothing,” emphasised Fleur.

“Well, then it’s time we got some answers,” said Pia, and began to head towards the door.

“Pia, don’t you think we should wait until someone comes for us?”

“No,” Pia said. “Is Aura still outside the door?”

“I didn’t see her when I came in.” Fleur looked dubious. “Why would she be there?”

“Because Michael said he would ask her to keep an eye on me, I assumed she would be guarding this hut. I have a feeling she doesn’t like me very much,” Pia said.

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“I want answers.” Pia stood at the door of the Chief’s hut, with her arms folded, and a determined expression.

Malarakin stopped his discussion with Michael, Niamh, Max, Aura, and Jenny. Their attention was now on her.

“Jenny, what are you doing here?” Pia exclaimed.

“Hi Pia,” Jenny smiled and proceeded towards her best friend. “Come in.”

Pia glanced at a large sheet of paper that looked like a map.

“What are you doing here?” Pia asked her again.

“Did they kidnap you too?” Fleur said.

“Jenny, what is happening here? Is everything alright?” Pia felt a flutter of alarm in her stomach. Why did she feel like something wasn’t right? She is human. What has she got to do with any of this?

“You are human, aren’t you?” Pia asked her, not quite so sure herself now.

“No, I’m not a human, but I am a shapeshifter too,” Jenny said slowly, trying to judge Pia’s reaction. “I wasn’t kidnapped. I came here because this is my home, and everything about you concerns me, as it does to Max as well. We are your protectors.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Fleur.

“I’m telling you the truth, you do trust me, don’t you, Pia?” Jenny took Pia’s hand. “Come inside. Please.”

Pia and Fleur promptly sat down on chairs around the table. Max was sitting on the opposite side; his gaze didn’t waver when Pia glared at him. There was warmth in those eyes...

“What are your questions, Pia?” asked Malarakin.

“Why am I here and why are Max and Jenny protecting me? What are they shielding me from?” Pia asked.

“Those are fair questions.” Malarakin gave a slight nod of the head. “In recent months, many incidents involving the dark queen, Regina, and her recruits of Lurers and creatures of the night has occurred all over England and some attacks have been reported in Wales and Scotland too. The humans are petrified, and the government are trying to keep their findings, low key.

“There have been two other attacks that I am particularly interested in. Can you think of what they could be?” Malarakin asked like he was asking a classroom of children. “I assume you remember the attack at the cottage, and the one outside your home?”

Pia remembered it only too well. “Yes,” she said. “I remember.”

“They happened for two reasons. You are of the next generation of Fire Witches, Pia. It means that you will be one of the strongest, if not the most powerful witches since the last generation of Fire Witches died out. Regina is frightened of what you can do, and what you will do soon. However, she

doesn’t want to kill you, but she wants your power, to do things that would compromise not only Earth but also Panay, and probably every realm in our galaxy.

“There is a pendant in the picture, too, that has an enormous significance to your future. The very one that the Lurer wanted from you,” confirmed Malarakin, when Pia questioned it with her eyes.

“I don’t know of any pendants. I tried to tell the demon witch that!” Pia said.

“Are you sure? Don’t you remember seeing a sapphire stone pendant, encased in a silver frame, attached a silver chain? Perhaps an heirloom?” Malarakin probed.

Malarakin was quite precise of the description of this pendant, thought Pia. Intriguing.

“Pia!” Fleur almost shouted, her face animated. “You have one. I remember it now; Ma used to take it out every year for your birthday!”

“My mother’s pendant,” Pia realised. She touched her neck where she used to wear it and felt a sharp ache in the heart. “I haven’t seen it at all this year... ”

“Pia, get that pendant and bring it back to us. You are the Fire Witch, and without it, your powers will not be complete,” said Michael.

“Why should I bring it to you? How can I trust you, or anyone else?” Pia challenged him. “We met on the beach that day, I remember. Why didn’t you introduce yourself to me properly? And Jenny, and Max... why all these secrets?”

“We are sorry,” said Jenny. “I wanted to tell you, I did, but I was forbidden. I didn’t like keeping this a secret from you, but if I told you the truth when we were only children, would you have believed me?”

“Pia, remember the bracelet I gave to you?” Max asked.

“I already told you I was sorry I lost it,” said Pia, crossing her arms over her chest. “What has that bracelet got to do with all this?” Pia pushed back her seat and stood up. She was getting tired and irritated and wanted to go home.

“Please, don’t get angry. I understand that this is a lot to take in, but it’s important to hear us out,” said Max. “The pendant is the key to saving Earth, Panay, and this whole galaxy, not to mention countless other galaxies. You are a Fire Witch, Pia. The bracelet was a protection charm from Lurers. But now that you have energised with the flame of the sun and your magic becoming powerful, there is no need for it.”

“You are the first Fire Witch we have come across, and when a Fire Witch is chosen, it is always good news. There will be five of you in total,” said Malarakin.

“So, are there more fire witches born... alongside me?” Pia asked.

“There will be,” replied Jenny. “And Pia, there’s more.”

“What else can there be?” scoffed Pia.

Max and Jenny looked at Malarakin.

“Your parents and your sister are alive, Pia,” Malarakin said. “They are not dead.”

(12)

BACK TO AZARETH'S DAY

The night of Azareths' Day, Serilda's House

All was quiet in the house apart from the ticking of the clock. The lights were dimmed in the lounge, and the only illumination was from candles dotted around the room. The guests left gradually once it was declared the house and the surrounding area safe by the Informers. Only Mike and Rita stayed behind.

"Have some tea, it will make you feel better," Rita said kindly. "I've added my special ingredient, and it will help you with your headache."

"Thank you, Rita. That's very kind of you." Serilda took the tea and smelled the herbs. She investigated the dark liquid for a moment. "I'm scared, Rita."

"I know, I am too." Rita put an arm around her friend's shoulders. "We'll find them; we will."

Mike came in with a couple of other warlocks who each took a mug of tea from Rita, warming their hands.

"The house is secure now. With the seal and the charms we put in place, only people with secure passwords and access to the unlocking charm will be able to enter this house, and only then, with your permission." Mike addressed Serilda.

"Thank you all very much," said Serilda gratefully.

The two warlocks finished their drinks and bid goodbye. Serilda thanked them both again for their help. As the warlocks vanished into the night, Serilda's eyes glazed over, and she fell into a trance.

"Aunt Serilda, it's me. I'm here with Fleur," Serilda heard her niece.

"Where are you two? I'm so worried!" Serilda's heart thumped loudly in her chest. "Régade and some councillors are out looking for you. Tell me where you are!"

"*Ma, we are safe, and we are with Max,*" spoke Fleur. "*I don't-*"

"*Aunt Serilda, we are fine. Max is looking after us,*" Pia cut her cousin off. "*He is taking us to a safe place. I'll speak to you again soon, don't worry*."

The connection was cut and then there was silence.

"Well? Was that Fleur and Pia?" Rita asked.

"Yes," answered Serilda.

"Are they safe?" asked Mike.

"They say they are, yes. They said they are with Max... " Serilda answered. Her eyes burned with unshed tears. "Oh, I don't know what to do. I can't just wait here and do nothing. I have to know if my girls are really okay, and that this wasn't just a cruel trick."

"They will be. Wait, what do you mean? How and why are they with Max?" Mike jumped up from the sofa.

"Interesting and curious," Rita mused. "Look, Serilda, both Pia and Fleur are clever girls. They will know what to do and how to defend themselves."

"Why would they need to defend themselves?" Serilda questioned sharply. "They aren't in danger!"

There was a few moments' silence when no one spoke to deny that statement.

“I need to find them. I am not waiting here anymore. I’m going to the Elders.” Serilda grabbed her outdoor robe from the stand.

“Serilda, no! It’s not safe to go out there,” Mike protested.

Serilda’s attention diverted to the pendant that Mike had laid on the table. It began to glow and spin, slowly at first, then faster, and faster. Images of a village, a hut, the girls sitting on an open field played before them on the wall as if someone had turned a projector on. The place shown was not familiar to Serilda. The girls seemed to discuss something. And then Serilda recognised Malarakin. The images vanished.

“Dear Gods of Panay, the girls are with the shapeshifters!” Rita exclaimed. “Did the pendant just show us all that?”

“I believe so,” confirmed Mike. He picked up the pendant and then dropped it. “It burned me!”

The three friends went close to it but didn’t touch it. The pendant had turned liquid hot and glowed as fire embers escaped the sides and disappeared. The glow cooled, allowing the pendant to return to its natural colour of deep blue. However, another symbol replaced the old. Instead of the tree, there was now an outline of a fire symbol with three words etched underneath, *sun*, *fire, power.*

“What does it mean?” Rita asked. She went closer to have another look, but Mike stopped her, picking the pendant up with the tip of his robe.

“This pendant can be capable of anything. We don’t know how this ornament will react when touched by skin again. Serilda, do you have a handkerchief?” he asked.

But Serilda didn’t answer. Her face was drained of colour.

“Serilda, are you okay?” Rita shook her friend from the shoulders. “Speak to us, please.”

Serilda’s hands were trembling. “It can’t be true... ”

“What?” Mike asked.

“The pendant, the shapeshifters, that place, the words on the pendant... can only mean... ”

Without finishing her sentence, she grabbed the hands of her friends and they vanished from the room.

Moments later, they appeared outside a manor house. The red stone building seemed to loom towards them, and the moon behind it looked more abundant than usual. It glowed golden. Serilda dazzled by it, couldn’t take her eyes off it.

“It’s beautiful,” she breathed.

“Yes, it is,” Rita said, who also couldn’t stop marvelling at the gold circle in the sky.

“So, now what?” Mike said, not taken by the moon at all. “Serilda, please explain where and why we are here.”

“We are at the Elder’s house,” Serilda said.

“I’ve never been here before,” Rita marvelled. “Ooh, this is so exciting!”

“I don’t feel like going in if you don’t mind. I’ll stay and keep watch outside.” Mike crossed his chest.

“Are you scared, Mike?” Rita smirked.

“Scared and I?” Mike gave a nervous laugh. “Hardly, Rita dear. I am a warrior... but, the Elders are just a little, um... intimidating.”

Shaking her head in disbelief at their trivial conversation, Serilda conjured up a velvet cloth with a swish of her hand.

“Mike, can I have the pendant.” She held out her hand and laid the cloth over her palm.

Mike fumbled in his pocket (he didn’t remember putting it in there) and felt the stone through the handkerchief. Pulling it out, he released it from

the handkerchief and laid it on the velvet cloth.

“I’m not going inside though,” he said.

“That’s all right, Rita, I want you to stay with Mike,” Serilda said.

“Uh-uh, I’m coming with you,” Rita blurted. “But aren’t you going to tell us what this is all about, and what we are doing here?”

Serilda put a finger to her lips. “Shhh.”

Mike strained to hear anything. “What?”

“There are wolves,” Serilda said. “I just heard them, and they are not happy we are here.”

“You heard them? Since when you hear animals?” Rita said incredulously. “And wolves... are you sure?”

Serilda focused her gaze towards the woodland, and there they were six of them. The Grey Wolves. She could feel their aura screaming at her with a warning. The Elders wanted no trouble here. She must leave at once.

The leader of the pack walked out of the woods first with the rest following, but they kept their distance.

“We mean no harm,” Serilda spoke to the wolves in a clear and loud voice. “We just need to see the Elders.” She paused and then carried on. “Can we have permission to enter the house of your masters?”

She then spoke via telepathy, “*Hello Kardia. It’s good to see you again*.”

“*Serilda*,” Kardia spoke softly. “*It’s good to see you too. What brings you here at this time of night*?” The alpha’s exuberant, yellow eyes glazed directly into Serilda’s.

“*My daughters are missing, and I am afraid for them. I need to see the Elders for only they will know where they are... you must understand*?” Serilda searched Kardia’s eyes, remembering not so long ago, what happened.

“*Very well,*” Kardia spoke. “*You may go. Serilda, if there is anything I can do, please come to me. I am forever in your debt...* ”

“Thank you.”

Kardia nodded her head and backed away, and then turned, running back into the woods.

‘You were just speaking to it, weren’t you?” Rita asked. “What did it say?”

“Her name is Kardia,” said Serilda. “We know each other from a very long time ago. She is an excellent friend of mine.”

“You’ve never spoken about her before... ” Rita said.

“Like I said it was a very long time ago.”

“So, are we going into the house?” Mike asked.

“I thought you wanted to stay here, in the safety of the woods,” Serilda said with a smile. “We are not going into the house.”

“Why? Isn’t this the house of the Elders?” Mike asked.

“We are entering the woods,” replied Serilda. “The Elders conduct their work amongst natural surroundings. The wolves will inform the Elders about our requested visit. Now, we are to follow her into the woods. She will lead us to them.” Serilda translated for Kardia.

“It’s dark inside,” Mike commented. “I don’t like it.”

Without responding to Mike’s protest, Serilda began to follow her friend. Mike and Rita followed behind her as she knew they would. Serilda tried to contact Pia and Fleur again but to no avail. Why weren’t they responding?

Kardia slowed to a trot and stepped in line with Serilda.

“*Is that why you want to see the Elders?*” she asked, reading Serilda’s troubled mind.

“*Yes,*” Serilda replied. “*I need to know if my girls are safe. If they are in any danger, then I will go and find them myself.*”

“*You will not be alone, my friend. I will help, and so will my pack. All you need to do is call me.*” Kardia’s eyes shone with sincerity, wisdom, and depth of her promise.

“*Thank you, Kardia*.”

Kardia ran ahead of them into the dense forest. Her soft, grey, and white fur visible in the moonlight, she led them on a path. The further they went, the warmer it became. Rita took her shawl off.

“Where is this place, Serilda? How much more do we have to walk?” Mike grumbled. “I don’t see why we couldn’t magic ourselves here.”

“I am in the dark as you two are,” Serilda replied. “I was not aware the Elders were not in their house. Be patient, my friend.”

“Mike, don’t forget why we are here!” Rita chastised. “We are looking for Pia and Fleur?”

Mike opened and closed his mouth and then said nothing at all.

“It’s all right, Mike. I’m sorry I brought you here. You too, Rita. This is my problem, and I dragged you two into it. You both go home. I’ll carry on here,” said Serilda.

“Nonsense!” said Rita. “How can you assume I’ll go home? I told you I’m coming with you. I’m not letting you do this all by yourself. Besides, I care for the girls as much as you do.”

“And I’m sorry for being such a child, Serilda,” Mike apologised. “Here, I am complaining all the while whilst Pia, and Fleur are missing. I’m ashamed of myself. Please, let me come with you.”

“Thank you, my friends... can you hear that?” asked Serilda.

All three listened to the woodland sounds, but there was also a new sound like water and music. “We must hurry, we can’t be far now.”

Kardia slowed down, and stopped at an opening where the music and the sound of water were louder. In the moon's light, they saw a floating,

translucent lake, and below the lake, a river snaked through a valley.

“This is the Valley of Virtues,” Serilda told her companions after Kardia spoke to her. “We are to cross the bridge alone.”

“There is a bridge?” said Mike. “I don’t see one.”

“I see it!” Rita squeaked.

True enough, a white bridge floated above the lake.

“The bridge will take you to the other side, where the Elders are waiting for you,” Kardia said. “I cannot accompany you from here.”

“I wish you could,” said Serilda.

“I wish so too, my friend. Take care, Serilda, and if the Gods wish it, we will meet again.”

Serilda bent down on her knees and hugged Kardia, pushing her face into her face.

“Goodbye, for now.”

Kardia turned back and ran into the forest. A series of wolf howls followed shortly. Serilda wondered what the reason was for Kardia to head back to her pack.

“Where did she go?” Rita looked back at the dark forest.

“Let’s cross that bridge,” said Serilda. “We must not waste any more time.”

The three friends began to cross, with Serilda leading. Mike tested the strength of the bridge by jumping on it and holding onto the side for safety. It didn’t sway or break, that was a good thing. Rita stopped midway and stared down into the depths of the lake. Serilda came to her and followed her. The lake was as bright as opaque blue glass. Drawn into the beauty, Serilda leant over the bridge.

“Be careful!” Rita pulled Serilda back. “That was very dangerous!”

“Yes, it was. I don’t know what came over me,” Serilda breathed hard.

“Why did you do it?” Mike asked.

“I felt the lake was calling me, I know, I sound pathetic.”

“Let’s get off this bridge as quickly as we can. This area may be beautiful, but it is not nice,” said Rita.

“Something tells me we must follow the sound of the music and the waterfall,” said Serilda.

Serilda, Mike, and Rita left the lake behind and followed a path lit by a spectre of luminous plants and flowers. Another set of woodland met them, which they trudged through, and finally came upon another clearing. They stood on a lush green hill with a thunderous and spectacular waterfall on one side and hills and small villages on the other. What haven was this? Serilda, Rita, and Mike were all speechless.

(13)

THE ELDERS

The Elders chanted in low tones, almost as a whisper. Echoes of the chant spread to all corners of this majestic land with acres of lush green fields, a thunderous but equally magical waterfall, and birds of all colours, dancing in the sky above.

Four brothers sat around a floating fire with eyes closed. They held hands, their cloaks fluttering in non-existent wind. Each one wore a cloak of a different colour and a different pattern; the sea, the mountains, the forest, and the skies.

“They each represent what they wear,” Serilda said, sitting down on the grassy hill. “I’ve not met them, only heard about them through the Council,” Serilda spoke mostly to herself.

“They have a strong and powerful presence,” Mike admitted. He and Rita joined Serilda, looking over the hill, watching the Elders in awe.

The chanting stopped.

“Are they... ?” Mike rubbed his eyes and leaned forward for a better view.

“I can’t believe it!” Rita jumped up.

From underneath the waterfall, arrived a family of the Pegasus. From the far hills, arrived groups of small creatures. Large Eagles swooped down from above and perched next to Centaurs, and last, Kardia arrived with her wolf pack.

The fire centred around the Elders diminished, and then they lowered down to the ground. In place of the fire, a large triangle rose with a clear image of Pia wearing a crown on her head. She seemed to be in a place Serilda couldn’t place.

“Pia!” Serilda’s voice caught in her throat.

The Elders stood up and bowed to Pia’s image as did all the other creatures.

“What is happening?” Mike asked.

“Welcome, Serilda and friends.” Algornian, the Elder of the mountains, looked towards Serilda, Mike, and Rita. “Please join us. Kardia informed us of your arrival.”

Serilda walked down to the Elders in a daze. This couldn’t be real, she said to herself.

Algornian and his brothers turned towards the creatures. “Today we celebrate the arrival of the Fire Witch and future Queen of Panay! She is reborn!”

A huge cheer rang from the assortment of creatures.

“We ask for the Chiefs to come forward,” said Daedra, the Elder of the Seas.

Kardia, from the wolves, stepped forward first, and then the chiefs of the Eagles, the Centaurs, the Pegasus, and the Rabbit.

Serilda assumed the rabbit represented the small creatures. Busmer, the Elder of the forest, turned to Serilda.

“We are aware you have many questions and seek guidance, my dear Serilda. This is an extraordinary time for us, for many have not witnessed the birth of the Fire Witch since the 18th century. We have waited so long, and now, at long last, the Sun has rewarded us with a saviour to save all the creatures in this world and other worlds too, from the ever-growing doom and evil.

“Today we received word from Malarakin, the Chief of the Shapeshifters that they witnessed the birth of the first of five Fire Witches. The Sun has chosen. Pia is the new Fire Witch!”

“I’ve read about them, they are perceived as the most powerful beings than evil itself, then how can Pia be a Fire Witch? She is still a child and does not possess such qualities. She is only sixteen, only a child... ”

“She certainly is a child,” Antmer, the Elder of the Skies, came in. “Unbeknown to us, why she was chosen to be a Fire Witch, we do not know. She is, however, also royalty, is she not?”

“Royalty... she is the daughter of Senon, who is the prince of... ” Serilda gasped. “All these years, I made myself believe Pia and Fleur were normal children. I forgot we were part of the magical community, and I forgot Pia was a part of a royal family on Panay.” Overwhelmed with her own ignorance, Serilda’s tears flowed. “Is that why she is being hunted by Lurers?”

“Being a royal descendant and a Fire witch, Pia is the right choice to lead the way to a better life, and she will be able to keep the peace for centuries. Don’t be frightened of her future but encourage her for what will be a tough

journey ahead. She will need your help and your guidance," said Algornian. "Later, we shall speak in private," he said in an almost inaudible tone, and then in a more significant voice, addressed the crowd.

"Chiefs, let us celebrate this occasion with gifts!" Algornian clapped his hands, and tables laden with weapons appeared before them.

"Those are gifts?" Mike observed with scorn. "Not very nice, are they?"

Rita nudged him in the ribs with her elbow, "The Elders can hear you; you know."

Mike smiled apologetically at Antmer, who gave him a raised eyebrow.

"Chiefs, please choose your weapons. The Fire Witch will need our help as she begins her journey, as stated in the Book. We hope to not go into battle with Regina's army, but we must be prepared. Those who wish to fight must begin training at once," Busmer instructed.

"This is not our war, Busmer!" the chief of the Pegasus objected. "I believe I speak for all creatures here."

"Not quite, Atharos," said Kardia. "We are with Princess Pia."

"We are too," said the Chief of the Eagles, Pandora. "We are with Princess Pia."

"What about you, Sebano and Noir?" asked Daedra.

Sebano, the Chief Centaur, backtracked. "We are not sure. I am sorry, but I will need to discuss it with my Council."

"We are in," announced Noir, the chief of the creatures.

"I don't understand. A war with Regina? Are you out of your mind?" Serilda looked anxiously between the Elders, the creatures, and her friends.

"If it comes to it, we will have to fight. Serilda, we have been observing the last few months in earnest. All the occurrences are not a coincidence," Antmer explained. "Atharos, this is a war of the witches. But we have all been caught in the crossfire, and now it has also become a war for all

creatures, witches, sorcerers, and humans too, if Regina wants it. There is no stopping her. She will do as she pleases."

"Over the next few weeks, we will continue observing her movements. We will follow her Lurers and hope there are no more incidents. We will force no one to fight, and it is your choice. However, it is our duty as the Elders to protect and serve princess Pia, the first Fire Witch of our time. I give you seven days to discuss this with your people, and after that, we require your answer.

"Kardia, Pandora, and Noir, thank you for your prompt decision. But this is a decision not to be made lightly. I would like you to discuss this with your people first. In the meantime, whether you are in this, you will all still be rewarded a weapon. This will be used when and if necessary. Please step forward." Algornian waved towards the table.

The weapons displayed were of the general kind, such as swords, bow and arrow, slings, daggers, and swords. There were also small bottles; Serilda assumed they were potions of some sort. She felt a raindrop and glanced up. Dark clouds formed under them, and a cold wind passed through them.

"A storm," said Daedra. He waved his hand, and the table of weapons vanished. "Take cover and be safe!"

A scramble of hooves, and paws, and soon the creatures disappeared back over the hills, and some through the waterfall. The Eagles flew away from the dark clouds, where there was still a blue sky.

"Come, friends, to our home. We can talk about what is worrying you, and I will try to answer questions you may have."

"Where is your house?" Mike asked.

"Through the waterfall, of course," replied Argorian with a smile.

*

“Is this safe?” asked Rita. “I mean, it seems rather dangerous you know, walking through a giant waterfall that has the potential to kill us.”

Serilda would have laughed if the situation were not so severe.

“I’m sure the Elders won’t be killing us,” she told her friend.

As the small group arrived at the foot of the fall, Daedra raised his arms, and like a curtain, the waterfall parted, revealing a door embedded in the rock. Another wave with his hand and the door opened.

“After you, dear friends,” he said.

Serilda expected to be inside a dark cave, earthbound and with no material objects. However, she was wrong. The cave was warm and inviting, with a lovely fire burning in a beautiful lounge. The seating area comprised long, shallow sofas surrounding a low table. It reminded Serilda of Japanese traditions. Her gaze shifted towards the entrance to this room, and she was pleasantly surprised to see the waterfall from the inside.

“It was Daedra’s idea, you know,” said Antmer.

“Because he is the Elder of the Seas?” asked Rita.

“No, he just likes to see the waterfall,” replied Antmer.

“Oh,” was all Rita could say, feeling rather silly.

“Please, take a seat,” said Daedra.

Algornian sat at the front of the table, and the other three brothers situated themselves along one side. Serilda, Rita, and Mike sat on the other side. A tray of tea and coffee, cakes, and sandwiches floated towards the table and settled itself down. Plates, cups, and saucers appeared.

“Please help yourselves, I’m sure you are hungry,” said Algornian.

Mike didn’t hesitate and filled his plate.

“Algornian, if you know where my daughters are, please tell me. I need to go to them at once,” Serilda said. She didn’t take any food or drink.

“I understand your pain,” Algornian said. “She is safe with the shapeshifters, and the Chief, Malarakin, is looking after those two. They are in the village of Adisa, a place where shapeshifters live. It is very secret.”

“Why were they taken there?” Rita asked.

“We are not sure, but we have some ideas. I shall begin from the start. For many years, since they took Senon and Marcaria, and we presume, little Leena, we have been focussing on events of Regina’s activities. Our brothers on Panay have given us information on her atrocities throughout the years. Nothing of significance happened until the day you, Pia and Fleur were at the cemetery.”

“We were visiting the graves of Pia’s family,” said Serilda. She remembered that day.

“Yes, do you remember what else happened?” Daedra encouraged.

“There was an unusual wind; leaves flew, skies darkened,” Serilda answered. “Wait a minute, are you telling me this was Regina’s work?”

“We are,” said Busmer. “Serilda, we have some possible explanations as to what could have happened to your sister and her family. They were Taken by Lurers, yes, but we also believe they are alive, even Leena.”

“How do you know this?” Rita intervened.

“The real question is, how do we know you are telling the truth?” Mike asked. “And why would we believe you? The Informers have searched for Senon and Marcaria for years, but there were no leads.”

“You doubt us,” said Antmer in a dry tone.

Mike shrugged, “Look, all this about the Fire Witch reborn, it all seems far-fetched to me. And another thing, who gives weapons as gifts?”

“Mike, please, let me talk,” Serilda said gently.

“There is nothing to hide,” Algornian told them. “Please take heed to what we are saying, Serilda. It is important you understand how serious this is.”

As Mike went to take second helpings, the food disappeared, as did the plates. He sat back in his chair, dumbfounded.

“I understand,” said Serilda. “I have something I want to show you.” She took out the pendant from her robe pocket and unravelled the cloth. She laid it on the empty table.

The Elders drew closer, their eyes wide in surprise.

“How did you acquire this ornament?” Daedra asked.

“Pia wore it when she was brought to me,” explained Serilda. “Why? Do you know anything? Can you enlighten us what the symbols mean?”

Algornian took the pendant in his hand, and turned it around, looking closely. The firelight shone on the side of the pendant, and flashes of red and green erupted and then dimmed.

“This pendant is no ordinary piece of jewellery,” said Algornian. “It is a portal. Whoever this belongs to, will be able to travel through many portals. Portals are sensitive and can only let those who have access to instruments such as these. It also shows you the past, if you wish it. To whom does this belong to?”

“To my niece, Pia.”

“So this belongs to the princess. That is interesting.” Daedra handed the pendant back to Serilda. “You must give this to her and explain everything she needs to know. She must wear this pendant at all times; it will aid her in challenges yet to come.”

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Adisa Village

“I’m a Fire Witch. I. Am. A. Fire. Witch.” Pia worked to process the information as she paced the floor of their hut. “And my family are alive.”

“I am stunned as you are, Pia,” said Fleur.

“So, what does this mean, what does a Fire Witch do? And if my family are still alive, where are they? Nothing’s making sense.”

“My dear Pia.” Malarakin arrived with Max, and Jenny. “This has come as a shock, and I understand that you have many questions. I shall explain, however, first we must isolate ourselves from the outside. Maxwell, please put the enchantments up and seal the entrance.”

“Yes, sir.” Max went outside. A moment later, they heard nothing, and all was pin-drop silence. He came back inside. With a swipe of his hand, the doors to the hut were sealed.

“What I am about to reveal to you is highly secret. The fewer people know about this, the better,” Malarakin said. He sighed heavily. “It’s a burden that you will have to take on your shoulders, I’m afraid.”

Pia and Fleur looked at each other. A cold tinge crept up Pia’s neck. She didn’t like this at all.

“Does aunt Serilda know about any of this?” she asked.

“I have passed the information over to the Elders, your aunt and her friends are with them at this moment. They know you are a Fire Witch, Pia. I expect them to arrive shortly. For now, I will show you the history of the Fire Witches.”

Malarakin gestured towards some chairs, “Let us sit.”

“The more time I spend here, the more surprised I am. I didn’t know shapeshifters existed, let alone do magic!” Fleur exclaimed.

“Within reason,” smiled Jenny. “We aren’t as powerful as witches.”

Malarakin thumped a heavy-looking book onto the table. It seemed ancient, bound in old leather. Faded gold lettering told Pia it was probably used a lot. The thin parchment seemed to have yellowed over the years, and strangely, a golden hue glow emanated from the book.

“I’ve seen a book like this before, is it a witches spell book?” asked Pia. She wondered what the shapeshifters were doing with it, and how they came to it. She tried to read the faded title, but she couldn’t make heads or tails of what it was. It seemed to be written in another language.

“Hey, doesn’t Mum have one like it?” asked Fleur.

“It is indeed a witches spell book, and it has been donated to us through one of our channels. This book is very important. You will learn a lot from it if you let it teach you,” Malarakin said. He opened the book, and the pages flicked over one by one. Eventually, it stopped at a page.

‘The Fire Witch’.

The glow grew brighter and then the words peeled off the pages, rising above them and turning into a moving picture.

“The history of the first Fire Witches dates back to the 15th Century,” Max said. “Legends say the Sun God made them protect the galaxies in each universe. Evil lurked everywhere, and it was the job of the Fire Witches to restore order and justice by banishing the demons to a place of no return.”

Images of five Fire Witches came into focus, looking upon the scenery of pure beauty, of clear running rivers and high mountain ranges.

“This was Panay as it was then. Today, you will see a very different world, full of fear, darkness, hate and death,” Jenny went on to say. “This is what the Fire Witches worked hard to defeat.”

“If they were so powerful, why did they die out?” asked Pia.

“Each Fire Witch has a weakness, as does every human and every creature. The Fire Witches hold power beyond any existing powers seen in our universe during the 15th Century. But they were also made with a weakness,” Jenny explained.

“The Fire Witch carries a magical property inside her. This unleashes the power to defeat evil. However, the properties come with a time border, and it must be recharged every thirty sunrises, by the Sun. If darkness prevails, and the light from the sun is blocked, the Fire Witch could die.”

“Then, I could die?” Pia asked.

“You are the first Fire Witch since the last ones died in the late 18th Century, of natural causes, all but one who is still alive today. However, she is very old, and she has given up her powers. She resides now in a realm that is not common knowledge.

“A Fire Witch has the potential to live for over five hundred years,” Malarakin said. “You are young and a strong witch, and with your protectors,” Malarakin suggested towards Max, Jenny and Fleur, “you will be safe.”

“Regina, has caused enough evil already. It is your job to defeat her when the time comes, Pia. We all are with you, and we won’t leave your side,” Jenny said.

“I can’t believe I am a protector,” said Fleur, happily.

“You are,” said Max.

“I don’t think I can do it,” Pia began to panic. She wiped her clammy palms on her clothes.

“I can’t be a Fire Witch. There has to be some mistake; I am not powerful. I’m just an ordinary witch.”

“It is quite normal to feel this way, Pia,” Malarakin said. “After all, you are only sixteen. This makes you the youngest Fire Witch in the history of

Fire Witches. We have not known for one to come into power until the age of twenty. You will need to harness your power, Pia. But you will need to understand them first.

"We shall leave you now. Fleur will stay with you. What you will see now is the world of the Panay in the 15th Century, and I hope you learn something from your ancestors. One thing you need to know: Leena, your sister, is also a Fire Witch. You will need to find them all. This book will show you everything you need to know."

(14)

THE OLD COAST GUARD STATION

“Pia, I am sorry.” Serilda sat across from her niece, dabbing her eyes. “I should have told you the truth about your parents and talked to you about what happened then.”

“I hold nothing against you, and you mustn’t blame yourself. The fact the Sun chose me as a Fire Witch is not your fault or something you could have prevented. It is something I have to face. Perhaps it was my destiny to fight, to make wrong things right again.”

Serilda smiled through her tears. “You are so brave, my darling. But you are not alone. We are all with you.”

“I’m counting on that. I’m scared though, I don’t think I can do this without you.”

Serilda came over to Pia and sat beside her, squeezing her hand.

Pia listened to Serilda as she told her about the meeting with the Elders, about what they said about the pendant, and about her being a Fire Witch. Pia filled in her aunt about Max being a shapeshifter, the very wolf that dragged her and Fleur from the party.

“It seemed such a long time ago,” Pia said. “Has it been just a few days?”

“Well, according to Malarakin,” said Serilda. “… I have something for you.”

Serilda rummaged inside her robe pocket and pulled out the pendant.

“This is yours, and you must wear it at all times. You wore this when you first came to me. We believe it is safe.” She pressed the pendant into Pia’s

bare palm and held her breath. The pendant didn't burn or mark her. "Has Malarakin told you anything about it?"

Pia shook her head. "Not really. He gave me a large book to read. I think Fleur fell asleep, between you and me, it was long."

Serilda and Pia both laughed. It felt good.

"Aunt Serilda, I read in the book that there were crystals to be found in different realms, could that be true?" Pia looked at the pendant.

"Yes, and this pendant will help you. It is a unique instrument. Pia, this is a portal to different realms. Only the one who wears this and those who they travel with, will be able to reach these places. We shall know more about it later. Malarakin will send someone to call us in a few minutes."

Pia fastened the necklace around her neck just as someone knocked on the door.

"Chief Malarakin wants to see you both," a girl said. Pia recognised her as one of the children of the village. The girl looked at Pia and shied away.

"Thank you. We will be there shortly," Serilda said. The girl smiled and skipped away.

"Well, I suppose we should go," Pia said.

It was dark now. Lamps were lit and fairy lights curved around small residential gates, on lamp stands and along the hut roofs. In the distance, the woods illuminated with shades of reds, greens, and yellows. It was spectacular. A glowing insect whizzed by and then flew up towards the Milky Way, which was clear and bright.

The door of the hut was open as they arrived. Malarakin sat with Fleur and Jenny around a round table. There was a pot of tea, and a tier of cake and sandwiches.

"Ah, here you are. I hope you two had a good chat?" Malarakin asked. He waved his hand, and the pot of tea refilled, and more cakes appeared on

the tier. “Now we must get to business.”

“Oh, more food. No, I’m too full to eat any more,” Fleur said. “And too full to have a conversation.”

“Why did you eat so much!” Serilda scolded her daughter.

“It’s me too,” said Jenny. “Sorry. Chief, can we be excused?”

“Certainly not,” Malarakin said. He waved his hand, and another pot arrived on the crowded tea.

“You all need to be here. Please, Serilda and Pia, have some tea and cake.”

“No, thank you,” Pia and Serilda said together. “It is late, and the girls are tired. Shall we get to business?”

Malarakin cleared his throat. He waved his hand again and the cakes and sandwiches disappeared, but let the teas stay. He filled a cup of tea in front of all the ladies.

“It’s a special herbal tea, grown in the village,” he said. Malarakin expression gained a serious concentration, almost as of the topic he was going to launch into, was burdensome.

“You now know that the pendant is significant, but there is a lot to be learnt for Pia to become an accomplished Fire Witch,” he began.

“I thought the Sun gave Pia the powers, which is why she has the ability to use the magic of the flame, to create magical elements? Fleur filled me in about the cage Pia made from her attack.”

“That was an uncontrolled power Pia demonstrated. She must learn the management of her powers, but more than that, she needs guidance. She must visit the last of the Fire Witches. She is just over four hundred and fifty years old. I have been informed she is not long for this world and is waiting for the right time to leave Earth. Pia, you must reach her before she dies.”

“Where does she live?” asked Pia.

“She lives in a place called Nepal, in another realm. It is a hard place to reach,” explained Malarakin. “You may face many challenges on your journey there. Don’t worry; you will be with your friends.”

“I will go,” said Fleur immediately.

“And I will go too,” said Jenny.

“No, no. It’s unpredictable. We know nothing about these so-called Fire Witches or even how to get there. How can I send the girls all alone?” cried Serilda.

“There is no other choice, Serilda. Pia must go.”

“Then, I won’t let them go alone.”

“Good. It is final. We will discuss travel arrangements early in the morning. So for now, goodnight.”

Malarakin finished his tea, and closed the meeting, leaving the ladies to the rest of the evening.

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The morning came too soon in Pia’s opinion. She was enjoying a dream where there was only her and Max, in Robin Hood’s Bay. There was no magic, no Fire Witches, or shapeshifters. She was an ordinary girl living in Yorkshire, with an average life.

She missed school and her friends. She wondered what they were thinking, or did they even wonder where she was? The Christmas holidays will be over, and school would have begun. The truancy officers probably were having a field day!

Pia looked over at Fleur and Jenny, who were both still asleep. Aunt Serilda was sleeping in the hammock next to hers. Pia climbed out of hers,

and went outside, sitting herself down on the cool grass. The warm sun made her feel happy, and strangely, strong. She thought back to the night before.

She and Jenny took a stroll in the village when aunt Serilda and Fleur were asleep. The village was beautiful and festive, and it reminded Pia of the small villages back home.

“How did you do it, Jen?” Pia asked.

“Do what?” Jenny said.

“How did you keep quiet all these years; did you know I was a Fire Witch?”

Jenny weaved her arm into Pia’s arm. “No one knew you were a Fire Witch until you blasted those fireballs at Semblance! I think we were all surprised. But, they gave me the job to be your protector when we started school at St. Ann. I made you my best friend. They told me to look after you, except I was too young to fully understand what that meant. My mother told me never to reveal I am a shapeshifter because it will scare you.”

“Your mother... your family, are they here in this village?” asked Pia.

“No Pia. They were murdered. I live with my aunt and uncle. They are shapeshifters too, but they chose to live in Robin Hood’s Bay when I was appointed to be your protector.” A sad shadow crossed Jenny’s face. “... Pia, do you remember when you rolled down that hill and nearly cracked your head on that rock? And a big dog came to your rescue and stopped you from hitting it?”

Pia gasped. “That was you... I wish I’d known. Thank you.”

“That’s what best friends are for, now and forever.”

A robin landed near her feet and cocked its head.

“Hello, little bird.” Pia put a handout and tickled its breast. The bird seemed to like her and tilted her head on to her hand.

“Pia, who are you talking to?” Serilda said. The bird flew away.

“Good morning, aunt Serilda.”

“Good morning, sweetheart. Come inside, Malarakin is sending breakfast over.”

The morning light flooded the hut with light. A sleepy Fleur was at the table, yawning. Jenny was reading a book.

“Good morning,” Pia greeted them.

“What time is it?” Fleur croaked. “I can’t stand it, it’s too early.”

“Don’t be melodramatic. It’s a lovely morning, and warm too. I feel fabulous!” Pia exclaimed.

“You would be feeling fabulous. Remember, you are a Fire Witch, born from the sun and all,” Jenny stated.

Fleur laughed. “Oh, I need to sleep,” she said, clutching her head.

Pia rolled her eyes. “Don’t remind me. You two are lucky; I wish I could pass the powers onto you and Fleur. I’d rather be a protector.”

“Well, I can’t be a Fire Witch, I am a shapeshifter,” said Jenny.

“I can’t be one either, and I’d rather be a general witch,” said Fleur.

“Hey, have you seen Max? I’ve not seen him since aunt Serilda arrived,” Pia asked.

“I think he had to go somewhere. It was the Chief’s orders. Don’t ask me what for though, I’ve no idea!” Jenny said.

Breakfast was made of freshly baked bread, tea and lots of it, cheese, fruit, and cereal. There was also hash browns, sausages, eggs and bacon.

“A traditional English breakfast, I love it!” said Fleur, and as always, she ate far too much.

“Now that you have eaten your fill,” Serilda took away Fleur’s plate, “Malarakin has invited us to his hut. I suppose Jenny knows where it is?”

“Follow me,” Jenny stood up from her half-eaten breakfast.

They walked away from the village, passing the bridge and finally, to a hut in a spot near the stream. It looked quite odd there. Pia expected to see pretty flower beds, a small white gate perhaps and a Mrs Chief Malarakin and their children. However, she only saw an isolated, rather small mud hut.

Malarakin opened the door.

“Good morning, all. I hope you have eaten a good breakfast. Please come inside,” he greeted them.

Inside the hut, a cosy little armchair occupied one corner and in another, there was a bed and a side table. It looked quite sad.

“Is this all you have?” asked Pia.

“Shapeshifters live frugally; we build these huts for sleep only, as we are in our animal forms for most of the time.” Malarakin scratched his head. “Unless we have families, we need then a bigger hut and amenities. As you can see, I live alone.” He smiled.

“But where is your family? Why don’t you live in the village, why out here?” Fleur asked.

“Fleur! That is a personal question. I’m sorry, Malarakin” apologised Serilda.

But Malarakin waved her apology away. “It doesn’t matter,” he muttered, but didn’t bother to answer Fleur’s question.

He dragged a wooden chest out from beneath his bed, brought it to the centre of the room, and unlocked it with a large brass key. He then proceeded to air draw with his fingers and then waited.

Nothing happened.

“Um, Chief Malarakin, what are we waiting for?” Jenny asked.

“You’ll see... any minute,” replied Malarakin.

A minute passed, and then, a strange hum began. It seemed to come from the chest.

“Ahh, it works,” he said. He opened the chest open, and a blast of colour shot out. In tiny bubbles, it floated around them like dust motes, and then they gathered at the centre, drawing an image before them. It was of a ship and a map.

“A ship?” said Pia

“Correct. The spell given to me worked, it showed us how to get to the old Fire Witch!” Malarakin did a funny dance, hopping and skipping.

“Who gave you the spell and are they reliable?” asked Serilda.

“Aradna gave me the spell. Does that answer your question, Serilda?” said Malarakin.

A blush of red appeared on Serilda’s face. “Well, um, yes. I suppose it does.”

Malarakin laughed. “Don’t worry, dear Serilda. Aradna will be here any minute, to explain what this image means.”

“I hope so,” said Serilda, feeling silly.

*

“Hello everyone,” greeted Aradna as she materialised in the hut. “Let’s begin straight away, shall we?” She studied the image of the ship and the map. “This will be a dangerous journey, Pia, so you must be prepared for what may lie ahead. It’s not impossible and is doable for a novice Fire Witch.”

“I didn’t expect this at all, Aradna,” said Malarakin. “Why can they not go via land?”

“What do you mean? Aren’t we?” asked Pia.

“No, I’m sorry. The only way to pass through the portal is via a sea entry.”

“But they can’t navigate a ship!” cried Serilda. “This is absurd!”

“The Fire Witches are spiritual beings. They decide where to settle during their last days, and they decide where the portal will be.” Aradna seemed to be speaking to herself. “In this case, this Fire Witch felt most at ease near the sea. I believe, just like you Pia.” She peered at Pia through her glasses.

She was right, Pia thought back. She felt good when at the beach. It was as the sea was her friend all the time. All her troubles left her when she was near the water.

“Yes,” said Pia. “But many people love the sea. I’m no one special.”

“What else does the sea do for you?” Aradna prompted. Her intensity unnerved Pia. “Do you hear the sea and its creatures?”

“I hear... orcas, and a humming sound. It comes from the waves... ”

“You hear Merpeople, Pia. They can travel from realm to realm. They had already identified you as a Fire Witch, which is why they try to communicate with you. But, you cannot understand their language, yet. It will come when you focus on them. The Merpeople will take you to the old Fire Witch, and she will tell you all you need to know.”

“How is that possible, Merpeople do not exist,” Fleur scoffed.

“A while ago, you didn’t know there were Shapeshifters or that your cousin was a Fire Witch,” said Malarakin. “You must learn to keep your mind open. You need that skill to combat trouble when and if it occurs.”

“If I can’t understand them, how do I talk to them?” Pia mused.

“You use your telepathy skills to talk to them. They are accomplished beings in that area. They prefer that communication to any other,” said Aradna. She checked the time.

“Serilda, I will talk to you once you get home. A lot has happened. I must take my leave now. Go back through the forest, and you will be home. Goodbye.”

Aradna vanished.

“We just walk through the forest?” Serilda asked Malarakin.

“As Aradna said,” he confirmed.

*

Walking out of the woods, Pia found herself, Serilda, Fleur, and Jenny, back home in Yorkshire, on Middlewood Lane. Malarakin suggested Jenny also go back to Yorkshire with Pia, and accompany her on this quest, although Jenny had already made that decision.

“I’ve missed this place,” Fleur sighed.

It seemed, as time hadn’t moved since they were ‘kidnapped’ and taken to another realm. The lane was as quiet as it always was, and it was freezing cold and very, very dark.

“Aunt Serilda, what time is it?” Pia asked.

“It’s four in the afternoon,” Serilda responded, checking her watch. She tapped on it. “The hands are not working, that’s odd.”

“Mum, do you think we can get home? My hands are freezing. Actually, all of me is freezing.” Fleur’s teeth chattered.

“And now, it is snowing,” said Jenny.

They all ran for the house. As they reached the door, Mike opened it.

“I thought I heard running,” he grinned. “Welcome back home! We all were expecting you.”

“Oh, Mike, thank you!” Serilda hugged him and stepped into her lounge. “You’ve switched the fireplace on!”

Rita came bustling in with hot drinks. She put it down on the coffee table and then ushered the girls near the heat source. “Warm your hands, girls, and then drink the delicious hot chocolate. It will do you a world of good.”

“You better come into the kitchen, Aradna and Régade arrived half an hour ago,” she whispered to Serilda.

Christmas music played on the radio, and the snow fell thick and fast outside.

“What day is it, Mike? My watch seemed to have stopped,” Serilda tapped on her watch again.

“I thought you would ask that,” said Mike. “Serilda, it is still Azareth’s day. It is now 9 o'clock.”

“Time plays differently in different realms,” Régade added. “And it doesn’t affect this world.”

“Serilda, there have been more incidents on Earth since you were away.” Aradna looked worried. Bridges have been attacked, spasmodic blizzards occurred, and some humans have claimed to have seen unnatural animals. They have reported deaths all over Britain.”

Rita went to a news channel on her phone and showed Serilda live video broadcasts on the BBC website. Images of people screaming and running flashed on the screen, bridges collapsing into the Thames, and snow blizzards covering the UK like never seen before.

“This is Regina’s work,” Serilda confirmed through a clenched jaw. “She is doing this on purpose. What is her plan? Why is she killing innocent people?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Pia stood with Fleur and Jenny at the foot of the kitchen. “She is trying to divert our attention while she searches for me and the pendant.”

“There is no time left. We must get the girls on that ship now,” said Aradna. “But only the girls. Serilda, I need you here.”

“Ah yes, the ship.” Mike looked at his watch. “Wait here, I’ll be back in a minute,” he said, dashing from the room.

“What is he up to?” Rita watched him disappear. She had never seen him move so fast.

“Always the inquisitive one,” smiled Serilda.

“Well, only sometimes.” Rita went red in the face. “You know, you can never trust that, Mike. He gets up to things that could either be good or bad. You never know with him.”

“Hmmm,” said Aradna. “You seem to know a lot about him.”

Serilda saw Rita’s blush deepen, “We have been friends for a long time.”

Mike came back into the kitchen, and all conversation stopped. Everyone looked towards him.

“I can feel my ears burning,” he said. “What were you talking about?” Mike unrolled a world map on the kitchen table.

“What are you up to? And where did you find that map?” Rita quizzed him.

Mike rolled his eyes, “Always suspicious. If you must know, when you were making the drinks, Aradna, Régade, and I talked about where we thought the portal could be.”

“It’s true,” Régade said in his deep accent.

Mike placed a salt and pepper pot on either side of the map to weigh it down.

“Gather around girls,” he told Pia, Fleur, and Jenny. “This concerns all of you. Now, all this,” he pointed to the west side of Africa, “is the African coastline. We are concerned with the area surrounding Dakar and Western Sahara. You see, the two clusters of islands here and here?” Mike showed

them the islands parallel to Western Sahara and Dakar. “We believe the portal is somewhere in the middle of this part of the Atlantic Ocean.”

“But that’s so far! It will take us ages to get there!” Fleur complained. “Wouldn’t it be better if we travelled by plane in the first instance?”

“Not in this case. We have to do this quietly as possible, and not be seen. Régade and I have observed the movements of many witches and warlocks in the western countries of Africa, especially of those in Western Sahara, Dakar, and Mauritania. We believe a majority of them are working for Regina, but we are not a hundred percent. We do not want to risk anyone seeing our movements; it could lead to trouble we don’t want,” said Aradna.

“Aradna told us about what happened in Adisa village,” said Rita. “There are spies everywhere. We have to be careful.”

“What’s the next part of the plan?” asked Serilda.

“We go the Old Coast Guard Station. I know of a ship that will take you to the portal. We leave at 3 am,” said Mike.

*

At 3 am, they huddled together in Mike’s van, trying to listen to the rising tide.

“So, everybody knows the plan?” Mike toyed with the radio. It was dead.

“I wish aunt Serilda was coming,” Pia said in a sad tone.

“I will be with you. You can talk to me anytime you want.” Serilda tapped on her forehead. Pia understood; she meant telepathically. “I believe in you. Let’s get a hug, all of us.”

“Count me out,” said Mike from the front. He jumped out of the van and opened the back doors to let everybody else out.

Even with thick coats, gloves, scarves, and woolly hats, the sharp bite of the night air cut into them. The plan was to get onto the ship when the tide was at its highest at 5.45m, at 3.36am to be exact. It was now 3.15am, so it didn't leave them much time.

"But how are we going to get inside the building?" Jenny asked. "It is locked. And there must be CCTV."

"That is why it is convenient to know the manager." Mike jangled the keys before them.

"How on earth did you manage that, and when did you do it?" Rita said incredulously.

"That doesn't matter," replied Mike. "Let's get inside."

The door opened quickly and without a creak, as most do. The challenge was the navigation to the ship in total darkness. It was a push.

"There is an old ship in the basement. No one knows about it, as it is hidden and not recorded in the official ledgers. To get there, we must descend via a series of steps." Mike dug out a torch from his jacket. "It will be slippery and smelly down there, be warned."

"Mike thinks of everything!" Serilda shook her head.

The steps took them down to the basement, but there was no boat anchored. There was just a massive seawater tank.

"Um, Mike. Where is the ship?" Pia asked.

"In the basement," he replied.

"Isn't this the basement?"

"Not quite."

Mike whispered a spell and raised his arms. The walls of the room drew back, and the tank moved away to leave a big space. The floor caved in, revealing the underside of the Old Coastguard Station. There it was, a ship made of wood, ready to go on a journey.

(15)

THE PORTUGUESE CARAVEL

The smell of mould, damp, and dirty sea water attacked their senses, and everyone immediately covered their nose, apart from Mike.

“There she is.” Mike tenderly slid his hand over the side of the old vessel. “The Portuguese Caravel; the Singing Lady. Do you know this is a 15th Century-old boat?”

Pia, Fleur and Jenny sniggered.

“Mike, time is running out,” Serilda reminded him.

The ship rocked gently as the tide came in, the indigo and silver, frothy seawater lapped at the ship’s hull, accumulating in height and volume every passing minute. The boat wasn’t looked after, and Pia wondered if it would work at all. She noticed holes in the sails and the splintered deck. Was that another hole at the side of the boat?

“Girls, be very careful, won’t you?” Serilda tone betrayed her dismay and worry. “Contact me whenever you can. I need to know you are okay.”

“Oh Mum.” Fleur hugged her mother, and then Pia and Jenny joined in too.

Mike gave Pia the map and a backpack with essentials such as a torch, screwdrivers, a ruler, and other practical things. Rita kissed all the girls on the cheek and handed them food and drink provisions and finally, Serilda handed them all a backpack each, of clothes.

“Don’t forget the blankets.” said Rita.

The girls stepped onto the ship. Serilda, and Rita together breathed a spell which fixed the holes in the sails and around the boat. Another spell cleared

the deck of mould and damp.

“It is safe to go on now,” Serilda said.

Moonlight filtered through the cracks of the wooden doorway. Mike pulled the lock, and the doors opened. A gust of wind and spray met them, and the boat began to creep out.

“Wait!” A shout came from above. Max stood at the top of the steps. He jumped down three steps at a time and then leapt onto the moving ship.

“Max!” Pia exclaimed.

“Sorry to be late. I’m coming with you; someone’s got to drive this vessel and who better than me? Mike, I got your note!” Max shouted as the small ship manoeuvred out to sea.

“Oh, thank Gods of Panay,” Mike said. “Just in time. Be safe!”

Pia looked at Mike and then at Max, wide-eyed as the sails inflated to a full pillow, allowing the wind to help the boat along.

*

“You are here, I can’t believe it!” Pia jumped and hugged Max.

“Wait. This doesn’t add up. You got a message from Mike to join us?” Jenny asked.

“He needed me to navigate this beautiful ship and to protect you too.” Max said cheerily. “Look, I am older than all of you and... ”

“What would have happened if you hadn’t arrived in time?” Fleur said, aghast at the thought of the three of them on a boat they couldn’t drive!

“Mike told me how to work this boat, we would have been fine, Max.” Jenny folded her arms over her chest. “There was no need to send you.”

“So you know how to drive this ship, you have the experience, do you?” Max mocked her. “I’ve been on plenty of fishing expeditions with Mike; let

me have you know, Jen. I am obviously the preferred candidate."

"How do you know how to work a ship, Jenny?" asked Pia.

"Mike showed me a diagram," Jenny admitted sheepishly.

"Then we were good as dead!" piped Fleur.

"Thanks," muttered Jenny, bemused.

"Come on ladies, let's enjoy the journey and stop this disagreement. Jen, I'll let you have a go if you want," Mike grinned.

Jenny shot him a look of loathing.

The night became day in a few short hours. The deep blue stretched out before them with the sun twinkling on the surface. Pia had fallen asleep on Max's shoulder with a blanket wrapped around her. Fleur and Jenny used one room to take an hour or two of sleep. Max volunteered to stay awake. He couldn't sleep, anyway.

He just had got back to the village a few hours ago, expecting Pia to still be there. Instead, he was given a note by Aura.

"What's this?" he asked her.

Aura shrugged. "Malarakin told me to give it to you. Nothing else was said."

Max took the note from her but didn't trust her. "Have you read it?"

"Now why would you think that?" A smile played on her lips.

When Aura was gone, Max tore the note open. 'Ship navigator and protector needed. Be at the Old Coastguard Station, Robin Hood's Bay, 3 am'.

Max had nearly missed the boat, thanks to the trouble he had to sort out between two of his fellow village boys. Often seen as the man to break up fights, Max was called upon frequently. Malarakin had to leave to do mysterious bidding – he was always so secretive – and so Max couldn't

contact him on this problem. The argument and the decision he had made left him disturbed, for this argument involved Pia.

“How can we trust her?” Semblance snarled in his panther form. “She is a Fire Witch!” He bared his canines and snarled louder.

“She is the one who will save us all!” Semblance’s younger sister, Simma, snarled back in her Cheetah form. “What are you doing? Are you with the Dark witches? Who is controlling you?”

“I am with no one!” Semblance’s anger peaked again and leapt on his sister, who jumped out of the way.

“This won’t go unnoticed. Mark my words, dear brother!”

Semblances’ roar was heard from the other side of the village, and that was when Max had no choice but to intervene. He transformed into a panther.

As he arrived, he saw the siblings biting, gnarling, jaws against skin, claws leaving long bloody streaks. Within seconds, Max jumped in and snapped at them both, as he gazed deep into their eyes, challenging them to fight him. No one made a move. Max was Malarakin’s right-hand man, and no one would make a move against him.

“Anyone care to explain to me what this is about?” he snarled.

“Semblance has changed.” Simma burned with fury. “I heard the princess’ name as I entered the hut. There was someone else there.”

“That’s a lie. There was no one in the hut apart from me,” Semblance defended.

“Did you see this person?” asked Max.

“He or she fled as soon as I opened the door,” said Simma.

Max turned to Semblance. “I would have thought you learnt your lesson from the last time, when you decided to attack the princess. Apparently not.

Semblance, you are a risk to everyone at the village, and I cannot have you disturb the peace here any longer. I will have to report this to Malarakin."

"You are taking her word against mine." Semblance snarled.

Max had seen Semblance change in the past few weeks. His once-friendly persona turned darker every passing winter since his father left him. But enough was enough.

Semblance turned back to his human avatar. Max, and Simma followed suit.

"Do you know what, I have had enough of this sad place!" Semblance spat. "I am not taking any more orders from anyone, and you can tell the old man exactly that!"

"You are stepping out of line, Semblance. Be very careful of what you say or do!" Max's anger peaked.

"I'm leaving, Maxwell. And I will never return." Semblance spoke to his sister next, "See you around, sis. You can always come with me, if you like."

"Where are you going?" Simma asked.

Semblance glanced at Max, "I'd rather not say here."

"It's alright, brother. I'd rather stay here than move to the dark side with you."

"As you wish. Goodbye then." Semblance turned back to a panther and bolted out of the woods.

Pia had been awake for some time now and felt the change of Max's aura. Something was troubling him. She came to a sitting position, bringing Max out of his thoughts.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," he smiled. "Had a good rest?"

"Sorry for nodding off, I was supposed to keep you company." Pia yawned. "You should have woken me up... Max, are you all right?"

“Yes, why?” he asked.

“I don’t know, but it feels like you are worried about something.”

“I’m not worried about anything, apart for your safety.”

“Is that why you came, to be my babysitter?”

Max laughed. “You are special to me. I can’t lose you.”

Max had never said that to her before, and she felt a warm glow inside her.

Pia gave him a peck on the mouth, “So, where are we?”

“Somewhere between France and Spain. It will be another couple of days before we reach The Canary Islands,” said Max. “Shall we have some breakfast? Are you hungry?”

“Did someone say breakfast?” Fleur came up from the lower deck, followed by Jenny. “Let’s eat!”

Max brought out some cheese, bread, and grapes. There were also crackers and butter. “We will find better food later. Eat up!”

“I miss my English breakfast,” sighed Fleur.

“I would much prefer cereal,” said Jenny. “But this is good too.”

Pia didn’t eat much and was itching to get to the portal. Two days was a very long time.

“We have to move faster. We are witches. We must be able to use a spell or two,” she cried suddenly. “We need to create a powerful wind!”

“I’m not sure that is a good idea,” Jenny protested quickly.

Pia ignored her and pushed past her to get to the forecastle. She began a spell as she walked to the front of the ship, her arms wide, allowing the flow of the spell to work to its maximum potential.

“To the power of the wind, I call upon you. To the power of the sea, I call upon you; bring us your strength and force. I command thee!”

“Pia, stop it!” Fleur screamed at her.

Pia drew the magic from her core and blasted fireballs into the sky and the sea. The ship began to rock dangerously from side to side, becoming fiercer by the minute. The clear sky grew angry as clouds gathered, different shades of purples, blues, and black. The sea frothed backwards and forwards, crashing into the ship's hull.

Jenny and Fleur screamed, clutching one another. They had never seen Pia like this; she was out of control!

"Pia! Stop this now!" Max roared above the shrieking storm.

Holding the sides, he crept up the ship to Pia. She turned towards him, and he stopped. This wasn't Pia; this was someone else taking over her. This magic was not from this world; it spelt dark bidding.

Pia used her power and blasted Max. He flew backwards, hitting the stern. Pia couldn't stop; her mind was awash with the most potent magic she had ever felt. She felt exhilarated.

"Pia, you must stop! Now!" a voice in her head screamed. Pia, then saw the horror she unleashed. *Oh, dear Gods, what have I done?*

"I command thee to stop!" she yelled at the wind, the rain, the turmoil of the uncontrollable sea, and to any force that would listen. Instead of calming down, the force grew stronger and beyond threatening. Sea spray soaked them throughout and made the deck slippery. Wave after wave hit then with no sign of stopping.

Lightning lit up the clouds for a second. Pia wasn't sure but was that a witch on a broom? Another belting spray sent Pia flying into the sea. She spluttered as she bobbed in and out, enormous waves engulfing her. She couldn't see Max, Jenny, or Fleur. Feeble attempts of magic sizzled under the sea surface. The light dimmed, taking her into the depths of the blue sea.

She fought with all her might to reach the surface. She sank repeatedly. It exhausted her.

“Stop resisting. You can breathe.” It was that voice inside her head again. Pia could see a blur in front of her and hazy spots of colour. She blinked several times, and then her vision became as sharp as if she was out of the water.

“You can breathe here.”

Pia realised she was staring at a mermaid... so beautiful, it took her breath away. The creature’s face showed empathy. Her porcelain complexion shone with kindness. Pia felt at ease immediately. She wasn’t struggling anymore, and she was breathing underwater!

“I’m Cami,” said the mermaid. She grabbed Pia’s hand and pulled her upwards towards the surface.

“Thank you for saving me.” Pia gulped in the sea air as they surfaced. The atmosphere in the water seemed stifling.

“Are you well?” The mermaid observed her in worry.

“Are you real or am I imagining this?” Pia questioned her.

“I am, and this is real as it can be,” replied Cami. “This is the Atlantic Ocean, Princess Pia. My kind thrives in these waters, but we can live on land too. Come with me. I will take you there.” Cami dived back under the sea and began to swim away.

“Wait!” Pia went back in too.

Afraid to lose sight of her, she swam faster. The deeper she swam, strangely, the lighter the sea became. Pia saw a shimmering green and red tail ahead of her and long, flowing hair. She concentrated all her energy from her core, and she felt a surge of power flow through her. Within seconds, she was zooming through the underwater current and caught up

with her new mermaid friend. Cami looked sideways and smiled at her. To Pia's astonishment, Cami didn't seem surprised.

The seascape turned into a small city of coral beds, some mountains, and even a waterfall. Pia had seen nothing like it. There were fields on either side of them, lush green fields. The water tasted of minerals, and it was clear and fresh.

"*We come here every few days to regenerate and refresh the minerals in our skin. This allows us to live on land,*" Cami explained via telepathy. "*Our tails turn into legs when we are dry and back into fishtails when we go into the sea*."

They came to the edge and halted. In front of them was a ruin. Dark matter floated around there.

"*We must not go any further,*" said Cami. "*It is poisonous for us*."

"*What happened here*?" Pia asked.

"*What you can see here is the destruction of an ancient city where many species of the water world lived. Some became extinct, and some fled to other waters*." Cami paused. Pia wondered what she was thinking about; she wanted to know more about this city.

"*I can sense you want to know more about us, but you must be patient, Princess,*" Cami said. "*Now, we must head back the way we came*."

They turned and swam away from the blackened city, away from the hills and fields, and away from the coral city. They entered open waters. The sounds of the sea kept Pia in thought. Echoes of large mammals – Pia assumed Orcas and other Whale species – overwhelmed her, and she wanted to hear more. She also heard clicks from dolphins. She felt they were communicating with her.

"*I can hear them,*" she said to Cami.

"*What do you hear*?"

“*I hear Orcas and I hear dolphins. They are welcoming me... it is strange*.”

“*Is it really that strange? Tell me, have you ever had a connection to the sea and its creatures before?*” Cami smiled at Pia.

Pia thought back. There were times when she thought she could hear the sea breathing and sounds she couldn’t understand. It was clear now. It was the Orcas and dolphins all along. They were trying to communicate with her!

“*There you go,*” said Cami.

Pia hadn’t noticed the seabed rising, and she soon was standing before a white sandy island.

(16)

CAMI’S ISLAND

The island looked idyllic, the types you see in glossy holiday magazines. A sandy white beach stretched out on both sides of the turquoise waters, shady palm trees and blissful solitude made up the gorgeous surroundings. This beach was very different to the beaches in England, called Seaside’s’ by the Brits. They were overcrowded in the summertime with lukewarm muddy waters, some full of seaweed. But Pia still enjoyed the beaches in Southern England, and even though Robin Hood’s Bay wasn’t as beautiful as this one, it still had its charms, and Pia loved it.

“You must be hungry,” Cami observed. She walked – Pia did a double take, Cami had legs! – to a cluster of palm trees and shook a bendy one. A few large coconuts toppled onto the sand.

Cami picked one up and split it with a karate chop of her hand. She made it look so easy like she was splitting a tangerine! So Merpeople were strong too.

“Drink the water from the coconut and then eat the white meat inside. It will hydrate your thirst and satisfy your hunger,” said Cami, handing the coconut over to Pia.

Pia drank and ate; she was very grateful to her new friend. She realised she had been ravenous!

“Thank you, Cami,” Pia said. “That was just what I needed. The coconuts I have come across are small and brown, and hairy on the outside.” She laughed. “I have never seen any like these. Fleur would love it.”

Oh no! Fleur, Max and Jenny! She had forgotten all about them, how could she? Pia groaned and flopped onto the sand, feeling dreadful.

“What’s wrong?” Cami’s worried face came in Pia’s view.

“I am an awful friend. I have left my friends on the boat, and I have no way of knowing where they are or if they are safe. And we need to get to the portal!” Pia buried her head in her arms.

“I can help you, princess,” Cami said softly. “In fact, I have good news.”

Pia looked up from her elbow. “Please call me Pia.”

“Alright, Pia. Your friends are safe and sound with my husband. My friends led them to this island after calming the storm you created.”

Pia flushed in embarrassment. “I’m so sorry, it was reckless of me to misuse my new powers,” she said in a meek tone. “... so, you live here on this island? I always thought Merpeople lived in the sea. Actually, I didn’t believe you existed.”

“It’s a misconception many make,” said Cami, who didn’t seem bothered. “We live in a city that was constructed around the mountains of this island. You’ll see.”

“Are we near Spain?” asked Pia.

“No, but we are near the African coast and not too far from the portal you speak of.” Cami made to move on.

“How do you know about the portal?”

“I’ll answer you later if that is okay. But we better hurry, the sun will be setting, and we need to reach home.”

With the beach in the distance, they came to a panoramic view of farming fields that grew flowers of all colours of the rainbow. The perfume of those flowers made Pia feel tranquil with the world. She felt happy, and all her worries seemed to fade away like a wispy clouds floating idly.

“I strangely feel at ease,” Pia said in a dreamy voice. “Like the world and its problems have disappeared.

“The properties of these flowers allow all creatures to feel the Peace of Unity and Harmony. It helps even the most troubled of minds. Be vigilant, though. The properties these flowers hold can be used to disadvantage people too. This region is protected by poisonous vines and will attack anyone who tries to steal the flowers.”

Cami led Pia down a series of uniform steps and away from the fields. In that instant, Pia felt her calm slipping away and replaced by worry and tightness of her stomach reinforced that sensation. She looked towards the sun, and it burned a deep orange, lying low over the horizon. Cami followed her lead.

“We must hurry,” she said.

“Why?” asked Pia, perplexed by the urgency in Cami.

“We mustn’t be out when it gets dark, Pia. Danger is everywhere.” Cami broke out in a run and Pia had no choice but to run with her.

“What’s the danger, Cami?” Pia huffed. How was a mermaid able to run so fast? Surely, they should have difficulty in walking let alone running too.

“When the sun sets, creatures of the dark come out of underground chambers. They are blind but fearless. They sense us and hunt us down. Daylight is like poison to them, but the night is their playground.”

“What do they look like?” Pia asked wearily. She heard a snapping and was that a growl?

The sun disappeared, and darkness came forth like a black blanket, and then the growling became louder. It terrified Pia, and she closed her distance between herself and Cami.

The creatures came forth. Their emaciated body and gaunt eyes sent a shiver through Pia. Their yellowed teeth snapped and snarled, and their

scraggly fur hung off by a shred.

“What are they?” Pia trembled.

“They are Night Seekers,” said Cami. Her body gave off a small quiver. “Demons of the night, demons who destroy people and anything. No one controls these things, but evil always follows.”

The creatures circled the girls. Pia and Cami stood back to back. Pia knew she had to do something; she had the power of a Fire Witch for God’s sake. Wasn’t she supposed to stop these demon types?

“That’s right; use your powers, Pia. Don’t be scared.” Cami undoubtedly read her mind.

Pia’s hands began to burn, hot energy surged through her core, and she shot out a series of fireballs in quick succession, creating a circle around her and Cami. The creatures sprang back on their heels. They hissed. Louder and louder, it became.

“Cover your ears!” Cami screamed. “It will kill you!”

The hissing didn’t affect Pia, and she had another idea. She chanted a Closing spell loud and clear. A flash of red haze perpetuated around the Night Seekers. With a circling of her arms, Pia created a white light and directed it at each creature. One by one, they turned around and slunk off to where they came from.

“What did you do? Was that a Fire Witch thing?” Cami sounded surprised.

“It was a normal witch thing. I wasn’t sure if it would work on them, but I had to try. It’s a spell my aunt taught me. It would tell the enemy their work was done, and they must go home. Luckily, it worked.” Pia snuffed the circle of fire with a distinguishing spell. “Let’s move on before any more decide to show up.”

In the dark, the two stumbled through more fields, down and up steps and along pathways. Pia's eyes adjusted to the darkness, and soon she could make out shadows of tall and short buildings. As they got nearer, she saw some lights and felt much better.

"Cami, is that you?" A man came forward from behind a tree and hugged Cami. He gave a nod to Pia who got a glimpse of his face from the lamp he carried. "What took you so long? I was afraid the Night Seekers would come for you."

"I am fine, thanks to Pia. Are the others safe?" Cami asked.

"...There has been some development. The committee are in the Hall," said the man.

Cami and Pia rushed down the hill behind him. Pia couldn't help but look around her, she didn't want to come across any more of those fiendish creatures.

As they reached the bottom of the hill, Pia thought she heard a rush of water, but this was not the time to investigate, she decided. The man slowed and they finally stopped at a building that looked like a theatre. They were met by a handful of Merpeople in the hall, along with Fleur, Max, and Jenny. Fleur hugged her first.

"I can't believe you are alive! I mean I knew you would be," she cried and then whispered in Pia's ear, "these Merpeople are strong and so beautiful!"

Pia laughed; it was so like Fleur to say that.

"I'm sorry, guys. I was so irresponsible; I shouldn't have conjured a spell like that and I should have been more careful."

Max kissed her on her forehead. "I'm glad you are okay. We thought the worst when you plunged into the sea."

“Seriously, Pia. I love you and all that, but you scared me to bits. I thought you were dead, you silly billy!” Jenny cried, nearly crushing her friend as she embraced her.

Cami and the merman stood together and faced the committee. Their attire consisted of translucent clothing, which seemed to merge into their skin. Their features were indeed stunning with sharp jawbones and striking blue grey eyes. Pia tuned into their conversations and caught snatches, “terrible”, “murder”, “demons”.

“Has there been a death?” she said out loud.

“You can understand Mermish?” the merman asked her.

“I didn’t realise they were talking in the language. I... I didn’t mean to pry,” said Pia, surprised and ashamed at the same time. All eyes were on Pia now, and she went red in the face.

“No one has been killed... yet, but it’s a matter of time,” the merman said. “The witches have begun to arrive.”

“What witches?” a tall merlady spoke from the back of the group. “Has this anything to do with the Stygian Mermaids?”

“We are unsure as yet,” the merman replied. “I’ve have still to investigate this further.”

There was a babble in Mermish.

“For the sake of our guests, let us speak in English only,” the man who met them said. He, now spoke to Pia, Max, Fleur, and Jenny directly. “Dear friends, welcome to our city. You will be looked after here. I am Ario, Cami’s husband and the speaker of our community. I believe you have a journey to take, Princess Pia?”

“With a matter of urgency,” Pia responded.

Ario acknowledged the ‘urgency’ with a curt nod of his head. “Then, we will take you there in the early hours of sunrise.”

“But what of the problem we face? “ the tall merlady asked. “Shouldn’t we do something about it?”

“And what about the witches and those Stygian mermaids?” a merman voiced.

“Please, if we can help in anyway, we shall.” Pia stepped up.

“Thank you Princess Pia.” Ario rubbed his temple. “Our seas have been polluted with dark matter. One of our kind have witnessed a species of fish and other creatures either dead or suffocating. It is dark magic I have not come across before and I believe it is the work of our enemies.

“We will arrange for a council meeting tomorrow. We must also meet with the King of the Sea Horse and other officials. But for now, our guests must rest. Cami dear, please show our friends to their sleeping quarters.”

Pia knew she must discuss what was bothering her, now with Ario. She spoke in a low voice, “Please sir, can we talk about another matter in private with myself and my friends? I want Cami to be here too.”

“Of course,” said Ario. “We will wait until the committee have dispersed.”

Minutes later, an assortment of witches, shapeshifters, and Merpeople, sat on chairs.

“Please, go ahead,” Ario said.

“Sir, the witches of whom you talk about are from my planet, Panay. They are dark demons and are after me,” Pia began. “It’s my fault that you and your people are in danger and are being targeted.”

“How so?” Cami asked.

Pia told them about the prophecy and how she was chosen as a Fire Witch, and she was being hunted by Regina and her army.

“...If I hadn’t started up that storm, you wouldn’t have been dragged into this,” she finished.

“Whatever happened on the boat, that wasn’t you. You are not in control of your new magic yet, Pia. This magic is vicious and has the power to take over, to override you. Don’t beat yourself over this,” Jenny consoled her. “It’s partly our fault too, we should have been more vigilant.”

“It’s no one’s fault. We have known about Regina for a two centuries from our people on Panay. This isn’t the first time she has had the nerve to attack us. She is using our enemies, the Stygian mermaids to cause trouble in our seas. I have come to believe she is seeking alliance amongst all the creatures of evil and will recruit some more if she wants.

“I can assure you we will fight; we will not let her win. While we live and breathe on Earth and it’s seas, we will protect her and her inhabitants. Pia, you are our hope now, and we shall use all measures of power we obtain to get you through the portal.”

Pia felt overwhelmed at this burden of saving the world, and more so now than she felt a few days ago.

“Are you feeling okay, Pia?” Fleur asked her cousin.

Pia put on a smile. “I’m just suddenly very tired.”

“Then you must rest promptly.” Ario stood up. “Cami will take you home.”

He took Cami to the side and said something in hushed tones. Pia was blocked from their conversation as she tried to hear them.

“We shall leave at 6am tomorrow morning. Till then, have a good night.”

Ario kissed his wife and left swiftly.

*

The balmy night air calmed Pia’s mind a tad and she decided to enjoy the moment as best as she could. As they walked through the city, they passed a

series of whirlpools, a stream that resembled a long swimming pool, and also a waterfall, all embedded within hillsides and mountain ranges. Lights built in and around the city made this part of the surreal world feel even more magical and enchanting.

The city was built as layers and each one boasted of small gardens, drinking water fountains, statues of important looking merpeople, and many whirlpools. Pia stopped at one particular impressive looking merman, who held a trident and wore a crown. He was depicted in his mermaid form.

“Who is he?” she asked Cami.

“He was the greatest King to the Merpeople, King Marsious,” Cami said proudly.

“He was?”

“He was killed in the Sea Wars of the 18th Century.”

At that moment, Max appeared by Pia’s side. She smiled and slid her hand into his. Cami noticed and made an excuse to see the girls.

“Hi,” Pia grinned.

“Hi back,” said Max. “I was scared you know, I thought I’d lost you.”

Pia sighed, “I’ve missed this. I often wish we could just be on a normal date; you know. I envy those humans to not have to hide away and can do whatever they want... do you regret being with me, Max? I mean we are hardly compatible, a witch and a shapeshifter.”

Max let go of Pia’s hand and wrapped his arm over her shoulders. “I’ll have it no other way.” He sniffed the air around them. “Do I smell seaweed?”

Pia laughed. “It’s probably me, I have been in the sea for a long time. You’ll never guess what I saw under the sea!”

Eventually they arrived at Cami's house. It looked like an ordinary brick house but when they stepped inside, all, but Cami gasped. It was like a life size aquarium, with large glass holds filled with water. In the 'dry' area, rested a sofa and a coffee table. There was no TV and no kitchen. Pia wondered where they slept, or if they slept at all.

"We don't exactly sleep." Cami read Pia's mind. "We regenerate in the tanks to keep our skins hydrated. The tanks hold sea water as that is the only water our bodies can tolerate."

"What do you eat or drink?" Fleur asked.

"Mainly fish and sometimes other sea foods too, a lot like humans. And we drink water from our springs here on this island."

Pia yawned; she really was tired.

"We may not have beds for us, but we do for guests." Cami showed them their rooms, but Pia and Fleur wanted to share one as they did back in Yorkshire. Jenny didn't fancy sleeping alone and asked if she could join them. Cami arranged three beds to go in one room.

"Have a good rest," Cami said, as she bid them goodnight.

*

Pia tossed and turned. She dreamt of sinking ships, the portal closing and her friends drowning. She must save them! Underwater, something dragged her down by her ankles and she couldn't see who it was. She tried to scream but no noise came out of her mouth. What was happening? But she wasn't dying. She was breathing. She was alive. Thrashing her body she managed to break free of her taker... and then she fell out of bed.

"It was just a nightmare, just a nightmare," she repeated as she picked herself up. Fleur and Jenny were still fast asleep. Pia wondered if an

earthquake would have woken them. She let out a small giggle but stopped abruptly when she saw a little girl watching her. She couldn’t be more than five years old.

“Hello, I am Pia. What is your name?”

The girls exquisite face lit up. “I am Ariel.”

“Like the Little Mermaid?”

“Who is the Little Mermaid?”

“Never mind,” smiled Pia. “Why aren’t you asleep? Is Cami your mummy?”

Ariel nodded and touched a necklace she was wearing. It was a stone of many colours. When Ariel let it go, Pia noticed a red glow surrounding it. A sun symbol briefly appeared and then went away.

“Ariel! You scared me, girl. How many times do I have to tell you to stay in your water? You will get ill if you don’t obey rules!” Cami’s hushed tone was full of disappointment as she appeared in the doorway.

“I’m sorry she woke you up,” Cami said to Pia. “I’ll let you get back to sleep.”

Before Pia could reassure Cami everything was fine, she left with her daughter. Pia climbed back into bed, thinking about the stone on Ariel’s neck.

(17)

THE MERMAID CITY

Screams and shouts woke Pia up.

“Get back to safety, go back inside your homes!” she heard someone shout a command.

“Fleur, what’s happening?” Pia was still full of sleep.

“Pia get up! We have to leave this island now! I don’t know how but the witches have found us.

“What are you talking about?” Pia pushed past her cousin and looked out of the window.

To her horror, she saw people running in all directions. Some lay on the ground; they looked hardly alive. Just then, Max crashed into their room.

“We’ve got to go now!” he exclaimed. “We don’t have time to waste. Hurry everyone! I’ll be waiting outside.”

“I don’t understand what is happening,” cried Pia. “Where is Cami? I need to speak to her.”

Jenny shook Pia by the shoulders. “Look, Pia, the demon witches have somehow found us, and they are looking for you and that pendant. Before they capture you, we must get back on the boat. You know how to do a cloaking spell, don’t you? We can stay undetected.” Max rushed back outside.

“This is insane. I will find Cami and her daughter.”

“I didn’t know Cami had a daughter!” Jenny and Fleur exclaimed together.

“Well, she does, are you two going to help me or not?”

The three girls rushed from room to room, but Cami and her daughter were nowhere to be seen. The tanks were smashed, and the rooms were flooded. How on earth did she sleep through all this? Leaving the house, they met Max.

“We have to go,” he said.

“But what about Cami, and all this?” Pia pointed at the chaos. “Surely we can’t leave them like this. It is my fault that this happened.”

Dawn broke, and the sun shone its brightest into the city. Merpeople dived in the whirlpool and disappeared. The brave ones stood rooted and defended their city from the witches using bows and arrows. Demon witches on brooms flew above, cackling and throwing down spells, causing mayhem.

Pia and the small group moved behind a wall where they found Cami and her daughter. Cami made a motion for them to move on, but Pia shook her head.

“I won’t let them do this. It’s my fault, and I will correct it,” she said.

“No Pia, it’s far too dangerous. You need to reach the portal. We will deal with this –” Cami ducked as a cloud of dust circled and rose around them, causing a mini cyclone.

Shielding their eyes, everyone moved away as quickly as they could. The wind power was far too dominant. Pia thought she saw a dark shadow. She looked twice at the same spot, but the shadow wasn’t there anymore. Perhaps it was her imagination.

“Okay, if you stay, we must get behind a building unseen,” said Cami.

“Mummy, I’m scared,” said Ariel, clinging to Cami.

“It’s all right, sweetheart. We will be safe.” Cami scooped her daughter up in her arms and ran to the nearest building. A searing arrow missed Pia by inches.

“Do you have a plan, Pia?” Fleur asked.

“I’m hoping so. Cami, can you use telepathy on your people?” Pia asked.

“I can. It will take some time, but it is possible. I must connect my mind to an intelligence instrument. It is used in cases for mass communication amongst Merpeople.”

“That’s great! Where is it?” Pia said excitedly. “I need you to get everybody out of the way immediately.”

“The instrument is at the top of that hill, in the ivory tower,” Cami told her. “Pia, what are you up to?”

“These witches are cunning. They may use spells on me to stop me from using my magic. I need to focus, and it will take time. Max, Jenny, Fleur, I will need you to cover me whilst I gather my power. Can you do that?”

“Yes, of course,” said Fleur.

“You don’t have to ask us,” said Jenny.

“Always,” said Max.

“Brilliant. Cami, take Ariel to a safe house and get everyone out of the way. How long will you need?”

“Ten minutes to get there and ten more to connect to the instrument.”

“That should give me enough time to work some basic spells on these witches,” Pia was mostly talking to herself.

When Cami was gone with Ariel, Max and Jenny changed into their animal forms.

“*We can work with you, Pia. We can use our spiritual powers in this form better than in our human forms*,” Jenny communicated with Pia and Fleur through thought transference.

“Wow, that’s amazing,” Fleur whistled.

“Now you tell us,” smiled Pia. She turned to Fleur, “Use the reflector spells back on their spells, and stop their flares and black arrows raining down on this city and its people. Jenny and Max, do what you can too.”

Fleur stayed close to Pia as they all headed out. Fleur immediately cast an umbrella dome spell to shield them from the enemy’s attacks.

“There she is! Take her!” a witch screamed.

Another witch shrieked a spell, and a rain of black arrows encountered the dome. The dome unfurled and collapsed. Fleur and Pia threw themselves against a wall, missing the next attack.

“This won’t work whilst we are in the open, and they can see us,” Pia said. She looked around frantically and saw an open doorway in King Marsious’ statue. “Quick, in there!”

Pia and Fleur ran to the statue, dodging more spells and falling debris. They closed the door as they got in. Inside, they found a room that continued as a tunnel.

“I wonder where that leads to,” said Fleur.

“No time to wonder now, we have to end this attack. Fleur listen to me. I can’t let you go out there alone. It’s far too dangerous.” Pia shook her head when Fleur began to protest. “I can’t lose you. Just wait here with me until I manage the powers within me. Please.”

“Fine Pia,” Fleur said reluctantly. “I can do it, you know.”

“I know you can, but you are still my baby cousin. You are close to me as if I had a sister, so stay put.”

On top of the hill, Max and Jenny stood tall and broad. Camouflage was an advantage, and they blended into the shadows of a towering skyscraper. The sun glinted on the windows of another building in front of them, and it hit Max and Jenny in the eye.

“*I think I have an idea,*” said Max. “*Jenny, one of your abilities is to bend objects and minds. Can you use that on those windows and create a rippling effect?*”

“*That won’t be hard,*” said Jenny.

“*I’ll then break it and send the shards up towards those witches!*”

“*Got it!*” Jenny stared at the windows and tilted her head. The windows turned liquid and rippled up and down. One by one, all windows swayed and rippled. The sun from the windows reflected away from Max and Jenny’s eye point when Max directed the light towards the sky. Then, with one final push of his mind, he broke the windows, sending glass shards flying into the dozen witches above.

Blood curdling shrieks dominated the air. A few of them fell off their brooms and plunged into the whirlpools and the stream, leaving a streak of sinister, black wisps of smoke behind, which then disappeared.

Down below, everything seemed to slow down. The Merpeople stopped running and stood still on the spot. The witches hovered. All was quiet. A faint breeze blew around them. Silence reigned on as the Merpeople listened to Cami’s message. Fleur and Pia came out of the hidden doorway.

A moment later, chaos erupted. The Merpeople began to clear the city, jumping into whirlpools and the stream, swimming into its depths Pia now understood to be a quick route to the sea. Like crows circling their prey, the witches circled the fleeing people, coming down closer to the ground. Their red eyes scanned the area, just looking for one person.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are!” They sang in unison in their scratchy tones.

“Cover your ears! These demons will lull you out with their singing, even though it is terrible!” shouted Pia.

Pia saw them open their mouths again. Black particles rushed out like a swarm of flies, making it impossible to see what was going on. As Max and Jenny returned, and a few moments later, Cami, Pia felt dizzy and unable to concentrate. Fleur felt Pia's heart falter.

"She needs water!" Fleur exclaimed.

"Max, take Pia and follow me to the water fountain, it's just over there," Cami directed.

They dodged in between shadows of broken stone and brick and reached the fountain.

"The fountains here have healing properties; Pia should be herself again soon."

As Pia drank, the sun flitted in and out, as the witches blocked it.

"I need the sun," she said weakly. "I need the sun's energy."

"Let's clear those damned witches out of the way!" Fleur shouted. "I need wind and water power. Pia is always better at this than me!"

"I can help with the water." Fixing her attention to the whirlpools, Cami dragged the water out and with Fleur's wind spell; they created a powerful mini hurricane. It grew in size and power, and the witches yelped, dispersing them in all directions as the spell crashed down on them.

The sun came into full view, and its rays hit Pia's skin like an injection of adrenalin entering one's bloodstream. Pia's strength doubled and doubled again. She knew what she must do. She had to summon a power so great; it would destroy Regina's puppets.

Laying her hands where her heart is, Pia summoned her will to her centre core. Blue spirals appeared along her arms, on her palms, and her forehead. Her eyes turned emerald and her hair washed silver. Energy like never felt before surged through her veins, gaining momentum. She arched her back, levelled her eyes on the witches, and let go.

A large, smouldering, flame ring flew, cutting through the air like a sharp-edged sword, blowing everything out of the way. Everyone around her ran for cover.

Blood boiled inside Pia's core; unbelievable heat covered her very being. Feeling elated, Pia let arrows of fire escalate from her palms. White lights of fury crashed into the witches, and finally… they were gone.

An eerie silence followed. Then Pia collapsed.

*

"She has used too much energy, her heart is weak, Max!" Jenny cried.

Max rubbed Pia's hands, rigorously, "Wake up, Pia!" His face was all concentration. "Please, wake up!"

"I know only a little about Fire Witches. She needs to be closer to the sun to regenerate her powers and her strength," voiced Cami, quite distracted. "She needs to be taken to the Observatory tower. It is the highest building here. I only hope we are in time... "

"She will be all right, she has to be," Max said gruffly. He picked Pia up in his arms. "Lead the way, Cami."

The observatory tower stood proud and tall, away from the city, up on the hill. Fleur stared at the sea through the window, as Pia lay on a bed directly under the observatory glass, soaking in the sun's strong rays. They had been there an hour, but there was no change in her. Max and Fleur stood at different points in the room, now in their human form. Nobody said a word.

Suddenly, the door crashed open. Ario stood in the doorway, looking dishevelled and very tired.

“Ario! Where have you been, and what happened?” Cami cried, running up to her husband.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t come quick enough,” he said. “I was ambushed by the Stygian Mermaids’, they locked me up.”

“Oh, Ario!” Cami exclaimed.

“How did you escape?” asked Fleur.

“That is a long story; we have more pressing matters right now. How is Princess Pia?”

“She is still unconscious. Her powers weakened her; she has hardly anything left in her,” Cami said.

“I may have a solution,” said Ario. “Where is Ariel?”

(18)

THE OBSERVATORY TOWER

“She’s downstairs,” Cami replied. “But how can she help?”

“Do you remember Cami wearing a necklace with a distinctive stone, the one she found buried in the seabed?” asked Ario.

“Ariel finds many unique stones in the sea, Ario. She has them all at home.”

“But do you remember the one she asked to be made into a necklace? This is a particular one, and this is what the Stygian mermaids want. Is our daughter safe, Cami?” Ario seemed agitated, perhaps even disturbed.

“Well, yes, she is in the children’s room. What is all this about?”

“Please, take me to her now.”

“We’ll be back soon,” Cami told the others. Her eyes fell on Pia. “If there are any changes, come and get me. I’ll be on the second floor.” Cami and Ario left the Observatory room and headed for the lift.

“What was all that about?” Jenny said.

Max shrugged. He was still holding Pia’s hand. Fleur turned away from the window.

“Didn’t Ario mention a stone their daughter wore?” she stated rather than asked.

“What of it?” asked Jenny.

Fleur pondered about it. “I don’t know. It’s just a feeling. Hear me out. These Stygian mermaids caused trouble in the seas, and then the demon

witches arrived. Ario speaks of a stone. I think these are clues connected to Pia somehow. It can’t be a coincidence.”

“You could be right there, Pia.” Jenny’s eyes were wide as saucers. “We need to talk to Cami and Ario about it. There’s no time to lose... but we can’t leave Pia alone. What shall we do?”

“I’ll stay with Pia. You two go find them. If what you say is true, I want that stone here. Maybe it will revive Pia,” said Max. “I can’t stand her to be this way.”

“Thanks, Max. We’ll be back soon,” said Fleur. She kissed Pia on the forehead and left with Jenny.

Fleur and Jenny took the lift to the second floor, where they found themselves in a circular room. There were five identical red doors, with chains criss-crossing each one. In the middle of the room, stood a statue of the same King they saw in the town centre. Fleur wondered if this statue would lead them somewhere, as the other one.

“Let’s try the doors,” said Fleur.

They each took a door and tried taking the chains off, but to no avail.

“This is impossible!” Jenny yelled in frustration.

“Let me try an unlocking spell,” said Fleur. She swished her hands over one another, and golden light showed a cross and a sword. They heard a click, and the chains fell off, but just from one door. It turned golden, and the door opened.

“That was easy. Let’s go!” said Jenny.

“No, wait. That was too easy. What if this is a trap?”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

“It’s not much of a security thing if a witch like me can cast a basic unlocking spell. Something doesn’t seem right here.”

“Help, please! Help!” they heard a faint wailing sound.

“Someone’s in trouble!” Jenny looked at Fleur. “We must go. It could be Cami.”

Walking through the glowing door, they entered a cave. The door closed behind them. What kind of cave is accessible from the second floor? What magic is this? Thought Fleur. An entrance to their right showed tidal waves in the distance and a moon in the sky. Was it night already?

“I don’t think they are here, Jenny.”

“Something tells me we should go to the left, into the cave itself,” said Jenny.

They walked a little distance, and the cave became lighter. They saw a man, and the girls stopped in their tracks.

“Who are you?” asked Fleur, ready to cast a spell.

“Relax, I will cause you no harm. I am Eddie,” the man introduced himself. “I believe you are here for Cami, Ario, and little Ariel?”

“How on earth did you know that?”

“Follow me.” Eddie began to walk away. “Your friends are in danger and have been captured by the Stygian Mermaids. There is much to discuss, and it can’t be done here.”

Pia jerked awake. Her fingers, hands, toes, and her forehead tingled with heat and electric energy. She felt very powerful. Turning her head to her right, she saw Max.

“Thank the Gods of Panay, you’re awake!” He kissed her on the lips.

“What happened, Max, and why am I lying in this bed?”

Max explained what happened when she cast that powerful spell, and how the demon witches vanished.

“We brought you here because you were unconscious, and you needed the sun’s energy. This observatory has a direct link to the sun’s power, Pia. It is what brought you back to us.”

“Max, where are Fleur and Jenny? Is Cami, and Ariel, safe? I have a bad feeling about this. Where are they?”

“Okay, listen to me. Don’t get worked up. Ario came in asking after his daughter –”

“ – His daughter,” Pia interrupted. “That’s Ariel.”

“Yes, he was asking about a stone she wore in a form of a necklace. He said the Stygian mermaids ambushed him, and they wanted it. To cut a long story short, Ario and Cami went to get their daughter who was supposedly to be on the second floor.

“What do you mean by ‘supposedly’? Don’t you believe Cami?” asked Pia.

“You know I don’t trust anyone so easily. But now, Fleur and Jenny have gone after them.”

Pia flung her feet over the side of the bed. “We have to go to them now, Max. I don’t know, but something doesn’t add up here, and I think Fleur and Jenny may be in trouble, not to mention Cami, Ario, and Ariel.”

“No, Pia. You are not quite well yet. You just woke up.”

“There’s no time to argue about this, Max. Tell me, which way did they go?”

The energy inside Pia surged.

“They went that way, to the second floor.”

“Then that’s where we will go too!”

*

On reaching the second floor, like Fleur and Jenny, they found the red doors, and each one was strung with chains. Pia didn't have the patience for this.

"Max, I will need you to change into your panther form. Now. For safety."

Max didn't ask why and changed in that instant, and Pia shot a fireball at each door. Behind four doors, there was nothing but brick. In the last one, a gaping hole disclosed a cave.

"*Now, that's interesting*," Max, communicated via telepathy.

"Can you find them with your sense of smell?"

"*I'm a big cat, Pia. Not a dog*," said Max drily. "*But, luckily for us, we do have a sixth sense. I will be able to sense their body warmth and see a trail of their aura*."

Max walked to the right of the cave where the opening was, and then turned back and walked to the other side. He came back to Pia.

"*There are no signs of activity near the opening, but I can see a trail going further into the cave. We must follow that*," said Max.

The two friends walked away from the opening, which grew smaller and smaller. To her amazement, Pia found the cave getting lighter the more they walked on. Torches appeared on either side, casting long shadows. Pia felt shivers up and down her spine. She thought of damned spirits.

"Do you believe in spirits and ghosts, Max?" she asked him.

"*Shapeshifters have a history of tribal encounters with spirits – paranormal beings – that seems to exist in many realms*," Max said. "*Why do you ask*?"

"These shadows remind me of them," she said. "My aunt told me her father fought with the spirit of an ancient witch demon when they lived on

Panay. Even in that form, they could cast spells. This one was mighty too, and nearly had cleaned out the village with her tantrums."

"*How did he defeat her*?" Max was now curious.

"Do you know my aunt never told me, and I never thought to ask?"

After a few more flickering shadows, Pia cast a shielding spell around them.

"Just in case," she grinned.

Echoes of the distant sea, and of bangs and knocks bounced off the walls of the cave.

"Do you know, I saw an image of the Sun & Fire in Ariel's stone. It glowed, and then it faded straight away," said Pia.

"*Why didn't you tell me about this earlier*?" Max asked her incredulously.

"Sorry, I think trying to survive the attack from the demons was more important," Pia retorted.

"*Okay, point taken. Sorry*."

"It's fine, Max. I'm just on edge with everything, I suppose."

"*… Fleur said she believes the trouble in the seas, the demon witches, the Stygian mermaids, and this stone... they are all connected to you. It makes sense*."

"What makes sense?" asked Pia.

"*If it is the pendant the witches are after, and they are looking for this stone too, then it is definitely has something to do with the crystals and the Fire Witches*," Max said thoughtfully.

"Max, how do you know about the Fire Witches and the crystals?" Pia asked curiously.

"*Word gets around, besides I did a little homework and read upon the history of Fire Witches in one of Chief's private book collections. So I know there are five crystals –*"

“– that must be found in five different realms!” Pia couldn’t stop herself. “And if Ariel has the stone, then the Mermaid city could be the first realm, assuming the stone is a crystal. But this still hasn’t answered my question – what does the pendant have to do with the crystals and the Fire Witches?”

“*Isn’t that what we are trying to find out*?” Max raised an eyebrow. He looked comic in his animal form, whilst he did that.

Another noise interrupted the conversation, a sound quite like nails raked on a blackboard. Pia screamed as pain shot through her ears. Max crouched low, his paws over his ears. Moments later, the sound faded to silence.

Pia shook her head to get rid of the lingering ringing.

“I don’t want to listen to that again, let’s hurry,” she said, feeling a bit weird.

They walked on in silence now, aware of every sound in the cave. After what seemed like ages, Max thought he heard voices.

“Good ones, I hope,” said Pia.

“*These are frightened voices, but I can’t understand who they are. There seem to be several voices here.*”

“Let’s run. This place is giving me the creeps now.”

Max’s gentle plodding changed to speed to match a cheetah. Even Pia found she could match his speed!

“Max! Help me! I am caged!” came a wail sounding much like Jenny.

“*Jenny*!” Max called out.

Pia’s head was splitting, “Stop that! It’s not her!”

“It must be her; I heard her voice!”

Pia stopped, her heart racing. But she was not out of breath nor in any pain. “Listen, it’s not Jenny. It’s a trap. Think about it, why would she shout out your name but not mine too?”

“*She thinks you are still unconscious. Isn’t it obvious*?”

“Jenny knows you would never leave me alone, no matter how dangerous the situation is. Sorry to blow my own horn,” said Pia. “And she wouldn’t call out like that. If she tried to use telepathy and couldn’t, she would keep quiet.”

“*We can’t be far from the entrance now. I can sense their aura becoming stronger, and the trail has some depth to it*.”

They walked now, ever more cautious.

“I can sense dark magic,” said Pia.

The torches burned lower and far and between now. The warmth disappeared, letting a chilly wind replace it. The floor took the shape of flat stone and rough rock. The walls turned painfully cold as Pia held onto it to stop from slipping. She quickly cast a warmth spell around her and Max.

“*Thank you*,” Max said gratefully.

“You’re welcome.”

They finally reached the other side of the cave where ghastly winds blew from all directions. A scene of snowy mountains, a lake, and snow-covered flat ground, met them. Snowstorms gathered in the distance covering a pale sun. Pia felt her spell weaken.

“What is this place?” she wondered.

A ripple in the lake caught their attention. It lasted for a few moments, and then it was gone.

“*A water animal, perhaps*,” Max said. “*So where do we go from here? I don’t see anyone*.”

Pia couldn’t understand it either, the place was deserted. “What if Fleur and Jenny didn’t come this way, what if they went out of the other exit?”

“*No Pia, the trail showed us it was this way. It was pretty strong*.”

There was another disturbance in the lake, and again, it disappeared.

“That can’t be a coincidence,” Pia said.

The lake now seemed to move. Clawed hands and feet climbed out, one by one they came, these lumpy creatures with ugly faces and tails, much like a giant lizard. They advanced slowly towards Pia and Max. Max stood his ground and roared. Unfortunately, it didn’t deter these monsters.

Pia let loose jets of fire. Upon impact, the gathering of these foul creatures dispersed, but seconds later, they regrouped and began to come back.

“This is very bad,” said Pia backing away. “I need to cast stronger spells. Perhaps a sleeping one?”

“*Anything, try anything!*” Max growled.

A purple haze crept over Pia and Max and towards the creatures. One by one, they turned back to the lake, and crawled back in.

“*That was amazing. Well done, Pia!*”

“It wasn’t me. I didn’t even begin casting the spell!”

“*Then... who*?”

“Quick, get in here before they come back!” a man in a blue-checked suit waved at them from a wooden hut.

“*I didn’t see that hut before, did you*?” asked Max.

“Nope, but I’m going in. I don’t want to be a meal for those things if they do decide to come back!”

When the man closed the hut door, Pia and Max relaxed.

“What were they, and who are you?” asked Pia. “But, also, thank you for saving us.”

“I am Eddie, and I am a sorcerer,” the man explained. “What you encountered were the cursed creatures of the Black Lagoon. It has always

been a chore taming them. But they get restless and hungry, and they pine for flesh."

Pia shuddered.

"Have you seen two girls by any chance?" Pia asked. "It's just that we are looking for them."

"You mean Fleur and Jenny? Yes, they are perfectly fine. And who is this four-legged creature next to you?"

Max turned into his human form. "I am Maxwell."

"Welcome Maxwell and Princess," smiled the man. "I shall take you to your friends now."

"Excuse me, you kidnapped them?" Pia's anger flashed through her face.

"Oh, I wouldn't call it a kidnap, rather a friend helping another friend. I can help you too, you know." Eddie looked intently at Max and Pia.

"Where do we go from here?" Max asked. "*Pia, I don't trust him*." He continued in telepathy.

"Why are you helping us?" Pia crossed her arms over her chest.

"Well, what I will do for you won't be for free. Naturally, I want something in return."

"Such as?" asked Pia.

"I want something from my dearest mother, the last of the old Fire Witches. You will get it for me, or you can say goodbye to everyone, including little Ariel, who I believe will be very invaluable to you."

"Leave her alone," Pia threatened. "She is just a child!"

"As the new generation Fire Witch, Ariel will be something to you that you never imagined. She already has a bond with you, doesn't she, with that precious stone she carries around with her? Don't worry; she is not in any real danger... unless I let the Stygian mermaids have her. I know they

are working with Queen Regina. Now, if you could step into this sphere and we will be on our way."

A large glass sphere appeared before them, and a door opened.

Pia shrugged, and stepped in. They had no choice really. Max, and Eddie both entered the sphere next, and then the sphere began to spin.

(19)

THE SECRET KEEPER

Joe had felt slippery dark magic sweeping towards Yorkshire days before it happened. It was her, and she was coming with her clan. Joe knew he didn’t stand a chance. He must warn the others.

It was midnight, and thankfully, Rebecca was asleep. Joe crept past her bedroom in the dark landing, and then doubled back. He knocked lightly, but it was already open an inch. Joe poked his head around the door and in the semi-darkness – for the moon shone its light straight into her room – he found her fast asleep. Satisfied, he closed the door and continued down towards his study.

Joe turned on the desk lamp. It’s light slowly spread over the various piles of books and papers, which lay on his desk. In one corner, a stack of newspapers blocked the draft coming from the window. A stone-cold mug of tea from the afternoon still hadn’t been drunk.

In the near silence, the sound of the tick-tock of many collected clocks magnified. Joe rubbed his stubble; his nerves a wreck. |He knew Regina was coming for more than the information about the Fire Witch he was bound to – Pia. He had known this day would one day arrive.

Thirty-six hours ago, Regina broke through the surface of Earth, and Joe heard her thoughts loud and clear as if he were listening through a phone line. She wanted Pia and the pendant, and she would not stop at anything to snatch what she desired. With his heart racing, Joe hovered his palms over a wall of bookshelves. Blue translucent light sizzled from his hand to the

wall. A click, and the walls divided, each side sliding away to the right and left, revealing a small hidden room.

A black chest the size of a shoebox sat on the floor and nothing else.

*

"Good morning, Dad." Rebecca kissed her father on the forehead and ruffled his hair. "Oh, you don't look so good. Have you had no sleep?"

"I've been working late, darling," Joe lied. "Rebecca?"

"Yes, Dad?"

"Before you go to college; I need to speak to you about something. Please, sit with me for a while."

A shadow of concern flitted over Rebecca's face. She took the chair opposite him. Joe's coffee had been forgotten.

"What is it, Dad?"

Joe placed an item on the table. It looked like an amulet. Rebecca picked the blue and pink topaz and turned it in her hand. She watched the light catch the spectrum inside this beautiful stone.

"This is a key, Rebecca. I have attached it to a chain. This must be worn at all times. You must never take it off, and in any circumstances, you must not let it out of your sight."

"Okay, Dad. But what is it for?"

"This key unlocks a unique chest. Rebecca, if something happens to me, I want you to go to a friend's house. They are kind people, and they live in a small cottage near the bay. Their names are Blossom and Sandy. Tell them I have sent you about a chest." Joe gave Rebecca a piece of paper with their address on it.

"There is no phone number. They like to keep private," he said.

“I don’t like this. Please tell me, what’s going on? What are you talking about? I’m scared, Dad.”

“There’s nothing for you to worry about... ” he smiled at his daughter. “Right, off you go to college, and I shall make a start on some work I have to do. Oh, and before I forget, don’t open the chest in front of Blossom or Sandy. Take it to a safe place, and then I want you to open it.”

“What’s inside the chest?” Rebecca’s tone betrayed her fear.

“I can’t tell you here and now, but everything you will need to know, when and if the time comes for me to go... somewhere... well, it all will be explained. Rebecca, I love you, you know that, right?”

“I love you too, Dad.”

Joe patted her hand. “Put the necklace on now and hide it underneath your clothes. Don’t show it to anyone, not even your close friend. We can trust no one.”

“But... are you going somewhere? Are we in danger?”

“We are safe, and I am not going anywhere.” Joe hated lying to his daughter. “Now, off you go.”

Joe was scared. He couldn’t have Rebecca in this house when the witches arrived on his doorstep. He would have to arrange for her to be elsewhere. He abruptly stood up and left the kitchen, purposely avoiding looking into Rebecca’s eyes in fear of his resolve falling apart.

In the hall, he rapidly dried his eyes and breathed in the air. Once upstairs, he heard Rebecca open and close the front door.

“Please look after her, Arianna.” Joe spoke to his late wife, looking towards the ceiling. He then glanced at his watch. It was time to warn the other four Secret Keepers of the danger heading their way.

(20)

THE WITCHES COUNCIL, UK DIVISION

The cool breeze of spring played on Serilda’s face as she sat on the grass verge of the cliff, overlooking the vast, indigo sea. Seagulls called from the skies, flying over boats and houses, swooping in and out the sea, or stealing food from the locals.

Some boats bobbed on the sea at this fine hour of six in the morning. Tradesmen arrived to set up shop. It was peaceful. Serilda wished could stay here for longer and forget about everything that had happened and still is happening.

She missed Pia and Fleur, wishing she had heard from them. Two months had passed and the only news she received was they had entered a realm. Régade and Aradna couldn’t find an opening to this realm and they had no way of knowing if the four pioneers, Pia, Fleur, Max, and Jenny, were in trouble or were safe.

“Meow.” A cat sidled up to Serilda.

“Oh, hello,” Serilda said, surprised. “Are you lost?” she turned her head to her left and right to see if anyone was around, forgetting that cats like to wander on their own. The cat was a Tabby with beautiful stripes on its back. Serilda let the cat jump onto her lap.

“So, where did you come from, do you have a name?” Serilda searched for a collar and found a pink one under the ruff of its neck.

“Ahh, you’re a girl. What’s this?” There was a note tucked into a tiny mesh, secured with string onto the collar.

Serilda untied the bag from the collar and extracted the note. Unfurling it, she read the message,

‘Come to my office. S.xx

Ps. It was safer to send a message via Stripes.’

“Ah, Stripes!” Serilda laughed. “Aradna wants me to see her, I wonder what it is.” Stripes looked up at her and meowed. “My thoughts exactly. Well, I better see what she wants.”

Serilda had been working alongside the Informers – mainly with Aradna and Régade – watching the movements of Regina and her clan. Their visits to England had accumulated over the past few weeks. They used unattended portals or secret passages to enter Earth, some even went to the lengths of damaging Earth’s satellites and then enter the planet through the hemisphere. Humans began to report unnatural sightings. The tabloids and sci-fi magazines went into a frenzy with reports coming in every week. In the last month, too many unsettling incidents took place and some too close to home. Serilda sighed. She scooped Stripes into her arms and made her way back to her car.

The Witches Council, UK Division, 1781, the engraved stone read. Of course, only witches could read this. To the humans it read, ‘Municipal Building, Est 1901’.

Serilda’s trip to London was few and far in between. Normally she would travel using a travelling spell to switch from one place to another with a click of her fingers, arriving moments later at her intended destination. But after the recent attacks on the witch community and not to draw attention to themselves, the Council decided to behave as humans as much as possible. Using magic nearly always left a trail and this could become dangerous for

Council members. They didn't want Regina's witches to track their movements.

Whispering the Secret Code entry letters, an invisible barrier flashed a florescent lilac colour, and then opened. The building itself wasn't spectacular, just a series of corridors and doorways. However, wooden panels on both sides of the corridor and dim chandeliers above created a warm feel about the place. The distinguished fragrance of sage and lavender relaxed Serilda. She reached Aradna's office and knocked on the door. A strong, "Come in," came from the other side.

"Aradna, you asked me to see you," said Serilda.

Aradna's office was a splash of colour with lots of white. She liked her home comforts and created a haven of soft furnishings - a red sofa suite with pumped cushions, red luxury curtains, and a red, gorgeous thick carpet. The walls were painted white. On the other side of the room was a large mahogany desk with a large, red leather chair. An equally large tank of different species of goldfish added to the place.

"Thanks for coming, Serilda. I realise it was a sudden request." Aradna stood by a tall, ledged, window looking over the Thames and Westminster. River cruise boats chugged along the murky depths of the river, with bright tourist faces looking out and taking pictures on their phones. Dog walkers and runners took advantage of the unusual sunny day as they walked or ran along the sideway. Today, the UK was safe and there was not a dark cloud to be seen in the skies. But it was no time to rest and they must always be alert.

Aradna turned to Serilda, "I had to send Stripes. How is she?"

"She is looked well after, I meant to bring her – "

"You can keep Stripes." Aradna smiled and took her seat. "As you know, with everything happening, I didn't want to leave a trail of magical activity

concerning our work.”

She spread out a few national papers on the desk, all of them reporting unpredicted weather patterns, most of them exaggerated storms, collapsed bridges causing a massive account of the loss of human life and destruction, power lines down, plunging cities into darkness and causing grid mayhem, tremors in the earth, and the list went on. One particular item of news caught Serilda’s attention. A news report splashed on the front page of a national newspaper.

“Witches on brooms or an illusion?” She picked the paper up and scan-read it. “It says here people have witnessed shadows of witches in the clouds during thunderstorms when lightning strikes. It seems as if the witches are doing this deliberately. Oh, Aradna, this is terrible!”

“This is very concerning, I agree. If it was reported on a tabloid, like others, I wouldn’t take notice. But to have this on the front page of a national, very popular newspaper, the response could get the UK into a panic. And I am sure some groups who call themselves The Occult, Witch Finders, and other such names, are having a field day.” Aradna rubbed her temple. “I am meeting with the Human Allegiance Committee today and we hope we can come up with a plan. We are hoping to speak to the Prime Minister this week. But I don’t think he will take it well. Anyway, I asked you to come here for a different reason, Serilda.”

Aradna conjured two steaming mugs of tea.

“Four families from our community have been attacked. This is very worrying, on top of everything else. I want you to investigate this ASAP, and as it happened in your part of the country, Robin Hoods Bay... ”

“But why would they attack there... ?” asked Serilda.

“Can’t you think of one reason?” Aradna crossed her arms over her chest.

“... because of Pia?”

“Precisely. My thoughts are they are trying to find out where she is. They seem to be causing all this trouble for the very reason that Pia is the new Fire Witch, and they are scared. They are looking for information and by attacking the witch community and the humans, they are making us notice. Perhaps we will surrender and give Pia up.

“This is just my theory but if we can be certain, we can bring this to the Elders and the Chiefs, as well as to the Executive of the Witch Council. If I am correct, then we have a fight. I feel the war is beginning again, Serilda. Only this time, it will be worse.”

“I’ll get onto this straight away,” promised Serilda, her heart thumping with adrenalin and dread. “Aradna, do the other councillors and informers know about these incidents in Robin Hoods Bay?”

“Not yet. I only found out by accident; I won’t bore you with the details.” Aradna gave a dry smile. “For the moment, I’m taking matters into my own hands and it will be better if we keep this between us. For now. I hope you understand. When they do find out, a file will be opened, and the enquiries will begin. The admin staff are not so efficient these days, what with the cut backs on pay.” Aradna seemed to be lost in thought.

“I don’t mean to pry, but why are you taking this on all by yourself, why go through the stress?” Serilda pressed.

“Let’s just say I have a history with dear old Regina. By the way, have you heard from anyone? You already know we have tried to access these portals, but it has been near to impossible, and we are still working on it.”

“I’m afraid not, Aradna.”

“Keep me in the loop. We will use these now, again to keep a low profile.” Aradna took out two mobile phones from a box and handed one to Serilda. “I’ve added the numbers to the phones.”

“Thank you, I’ll keep you updated.” Serilda was familiar with the smart phones even though she never had the need to use one. Fleur and Pia had one each and tried to ‘teach’ her. Serilda laughed.

“Something funny?” asked Aradna.

“No, nothing at all. I’ll see you soon,” Serilda replied with laughter in her eyes.

*

Serilda reached Robin Hoods Bay before nightfall but decided to go to the pub before heading home. Usually Mike or Rita would be there at this time and Serilda needed to be with friends. She didn’t want to go to an empty house just yet. Besides, the information Aradna gave her, played on her mind. If she could just find some information on these attacks. Serilda knew the barman Jacob quite well. He was a very nosy human and if she just asked one question, he would tell her the whole story, if there were one. It was 6pm, and the locals don’t really come before 8pm. Serilda would be able to talk to Jacob whilst it was quiet.

The smell of beer and chips met her as she walked into the pub. A few locals sat in their usual places and paid no attention to her as she came in.

“Hello there, Serilda,” Jacob greeted her. “Not seen you for some time, is everything alright?”

“Everything is fine, Jacob,” Serilda gave one of her brilliant smiles. “How’s business?”

“All good, nothing to complain about. So, what would you like?”

“A gin and tonic, please,” said Serilda.

“A hard day then? Say, I haven’t seen your kids around lately?”

“They are getting a lot of homework nowadays, so they keep busy. Besides they are kids, they will do as they please... ” Serilda decided to ask him now, “So, do you have any new news?”

“Do you know, I do! I have heard something from Sandra in no. 21. She said that the family by the pond were burgled and the father was later found dead! And that’s not all. Mr and Mrs Evans – you know the couple with the dozen dogs and cats – they disappeared. Poof! Just like that!”

A very thin middle-aged woman came to the bar, “Hello Serilda. Jacob, one beer please.”

“Coming right up. I’ll get yours too at the same time, Serilda.”

“There have been more than two attacks here, you know,” the woman whispered knowingly as Jacob went away.

“Oh?” Serilda pretended.

“And I don’t think they were random burglaries either. I think it’s some kind of conspiracy. They are trying to hush things down, but I know when I know. Two other families have been attacked and the people just vanished. It’s in the papers, in the tabloids that no one pays attention to. How do you not know all this already?”

“Oh, you know me; I don’t like to pry in other peoples’ affairs, just like you. What newspaper did you say?”

“I didn’t. It will be in the library. I think it was the Yorkshire Evening Post but I daresay it could be another. Do you have the internet, Serilda? Look on that, the article may be on there too.”

Jacob came back with the drinks and Serilda deliberately strayed away from the news of the attacks. She wanted to avoid looking too keen. The lady and Serilda made small talk and finished their drinks. The woman ordered another one but Serilda said her goodbyes.

“Another early day tomorrow. Good night all,” she said and left the pub.

Serilda unlocked her front door, coming back again to a dark and lonely house. Where there would normally be two happy girls reading or watching television by the fireside, there was now a cold and depressing living room. Serilda, heavy hearted, headed for her bedroom. She found Stripes and her own cat, Gizzy, sitting at the window together. Serilda was glad the two bonded so quickly. Gizzy lived with Serilda for ten years now, he just entered her house one day and never went back. Serilda adopted him and they built a really close bond together.

When Serilda came in with Stripes in the morning, her aim was to take the cat back to Aradna. She couldn't keep her. But now that Aradna said she could, Serilda couldn't be any happier. There was something about Stripes that struck a chord in her heart, so with Gizzy happy with a new companion, Serilda was also happy.

Serilda left the cats to their 'staring out of the window' and opened her laptop. She searched for news articles the lady in the pub talked about. Serilda typed in 'Attacks in Robin Hoods Bay, Evans' into the Google search bar. The news article popped up. It was brief and just said the couple disappeared and the police were investigating their case. Serilda scrolled further down on the page, and it showed links to the other attacks. One was a death, and the others were reports of disappearances. Again, no more detail but the police were investigating it. Perhaps she will have to go and find the information herself, like Aradna wanted her to.

Serilda yawned. She should go to bed. Taking a picture frame from her bedside cabinet, Serilda kissed the girls.

"Goodnight, my lovelies, wherever you are. I miss you. Please let me know you are safe." The cats meowed and made their way to Serilda's bed and curled up on the top of her duvet.

“Thank you, Gizzy, thank you, Stripes. It’s just what I needed right now.” Serilda fell asleep straight away.

(21)

BACK AT ROBIN HOOD’S BAY

As soon as the sun rose, Serilda got up. She didn’t sleep well at all in the night. Recurring nightmares of Pia and Fleur caught in Regina’s power, made her toss and turn all night. She was grateful for the sun brightening her room and things looked a lot better now. With renewed energy, Serilda showered and dressed, brushed her teeth, and then had a quick breakfast.

She gave the cats their breakfast before heading to the attic room. Light beams filtered through the gaps of the blinds directly onto her large, leather-bound book of ancient spells. She had left open a page of a spell she was

studying. Opening the blinds, Serilda let the light flood in. I must find the girls. A locator spell should do it. She expected to have heard from them by now, and the fact that she hadn't yet was unnerving.

Questions ransacked Serilda's mind and with each passing day with no word from them, her worries accumulated. Something had happened, and she needed to find out what it was. Placing her right hand on the book, she chanted the words,

"Book of righteousness and reasoning, of knowledge and power, of magic and resources, show me where Pia and Fleur are."

The book rose an inch off the desk and then dropped back down. It flipped to a blank page and began to fill with the words – *water, mermaids, demons, the witches' son. All safe*. The book closed with a thud.

"What? That's it? What do these words mean?" Serilda cried out.

Frustrated, she nudged the book aside and began to cry. Stripes, and Gizzy, walked in and sat beside her. Suddenly, Serilda felt strangely calm and collected. What was it with these two? She smiled through her tears.

"Are you hungry? Let's go downstairs, shall we?"

*

The book mentioned mermaids, Serilda thought. She grabbed a piece of paper and a pen and scribbled the words, 'mermaids'. She remembered the words, 'witches 'son and 'demons'; what could this mean? Were the girls in trouble? But the book said they were safe.

Then she realised. Why didn't she think of it before? Rita was a great locator witch. She always could find things when they got lost, and when the girls were away for more extended periods, she had Rita search for them. This wasn't any different.

An hour later, Rita rang the doorbell. She was muffled in a bright pink bobble hat, scarf, and gloves. Thankfully, her coat was black. She was a sight with a red nose and rosy cheeks.

“Put the kettle on, won’t you? Gosh, it’s freezing outside. Oh good, you have the fire going.” Rita took off her winter wear and toasted her hands near the fireplace. “So you want me to find the girls?”

“I know I didn’t give you much time, but I am worried… and anxious.”

“Well, you are bound to be, and besides, it’s not like I had other things to do,” Rita said to her good friend. She took the tea from Serilda. “Anyway, I’d do anything for the girls, and to be honest, I have been thinking about them too. I can’t believe you have heard nothing from them. It’s so unlike Pia, or even Fleur.”

“Perhaps they are unable to use telepathy this far away,” said Serilda.

“You’re guess is good as mine,” Rita replied.

The women made themselves comfortable on an oversized purple sofa.

“Right, let’s focus. They have been gone two months now. I will need to prepare for a strong locator spell, stronger than what I have done before. I need a clothes article and something personal to each of them.”

“There is something you should know before you begin,” said Serilda. “I tried a basic spell from my spell book It gave me some words I couldn’t descramble.”

“That’s intriguing. Go on.”

“The words were ‘mermaids, demon, witches’ son… and water. It did give me some relief in telling me the girls were safe.”

“That’s great then, isn’t it? This will make things even easier to find them. Right, I will need their clothes, personal items, a bowl of clear water, a pen and paper,” Rita directed. “Oh, I nearly forgot. I’ll need two long candles.”

Serilda rummaged in the girls shared bedroom and extracted Pia’s favourite book and t-shirt, and Fleur’s charm bracelet and an orange scarf. From her own room, she found some paper and a few pens, the candles, and then filled a bowl of clean water from the kitchen tap.

Moments later, they were seated on either side of a long coffee table. The bowl of water was placed at the centre and on either side, a candle. On the right side, Serilda placed Pia’s t-shirt and book, and on the left side, Fleur’s scarf and bracelet. Rita wrote the girls' names on the paper and the words Serilda had given her.

When the curtains were drawn, and the candles lit, Rita was ready. She closed her eyes and hovered her hands over the bowl, whilst chanting a locator spell, and then boomed,

“Show us the location of the girls we seek!” making Serilda jump.

The candles flickered, and a brisk wind passed over them. The book flew open, and the bracelet toppled off the table.

“Show us the realm the girls have been taken to!”

The words rose from the paper and fell into the water. The liquid churned, becoming rapid. Then it slowed, and an image appeared of a beautiful mermaid in the sea with Pia, the vision changed yet again to show witches on broomsticks, and then a vision of what looked like a brightly coloured living room. Pia, Fleur, Jenny, and Max, sat together. They seemed to be talking to a man they didn’t recognise. The image changed one last time to show a mountainside and a portal.

The candles snuffed out, and the image disappeared.

“That was quite unusual,” Rita said, almost inaudibly.

“I don’t understand… ” said Serilda.

“The spell showed the past, the present, and the future. Everyone is undoubtedly safe, and that is a relief. On the first image, it showed us a

mermaid, the second image was the demon witches, the third image was of a man, and then the last one showed us an image of a portal around a mountain range – that could be their next adventure!" Rita said excitedly. "They are alive and that counts!"

"I wish I could be happy and content as you, Rita. I feel uneasy and I believe there is more to this than I know."

Rita drew the curtains open. "Things will work out; I know they will."

"I know you're right. It's hard not hearing their voices or having them around here, safe and sound where they should be."

Rita hugged her friend.

"Oh, Rita, I don't know what I would do without you." Serilda gave Rita a teary smile.

"Aww stop that, you'll get me started. I hate being an emotional wreck!"

After Rita left, Serilda headed down to the high street. She needed some fresh air and wanted to clear her head of negative thoughts. The last twenty-four hours had been like a whirlwind of information and like Aradna, whatever happened and was still happening, revolved around her Pia. Why couldn't it be anybody else and why her? Yes, she was selfish, but all she wants is for Pia to lead a healthy, happy life away from the dangers of magic, power, and demons chasing her. The news that she was also royalty surprised her. This meant Regina would, even more, seek her. Aradna mentioned she had a history with the witch, and she wondered what it could be. Serilda made a mental note to ask her next time she saw her.

As Serilda entered Kat's Independent Book Shop, the bell on the top of the door announced her arrival. Kat looked up from her computer.

“Hello, Serilda. What a pleasant surprise,” she smiled. “Not seen you around these woods for a long time.”

Kat was Serilda’s friend and local book supplier. She was a fellow witch and stocked books on witchcraft, divination, spell books, amongst other traditional books. There was a whole vast section in the shop just for that. The humans who loved this thing came here often, and the shop was never empty, apart from today. Serilda was glad. She could chat with Kat with no one listening in to their conversation.

“Hello, Kat,” Serilda greeted her. “I’ve just come for a nosy around, and I thought it would be great to get some fresh air. I’ve not been to the high street for so long, you’re right. I usually shop from you personally, as you know.”

“Indeed,” said Kat. “Hey, did you hear of the attacks? They say it was a gang of burglars.”

“I have heard. What do you think about it all?”

“People have gone missing, and things like that don’t just happen, not here in Robin Hood’s Bay and not to four magical families, maybe even five now. There was another attack just this morning!”

That was news to Serilda. The bell announced another shopper, and she swiftly moved to the Witchcraft section. As she absently rummaged through the books, she came across a fascinating title, ‘A Secret History of Witches’.

Another visitor entered the shop, and Serilda realised with regret she wouldn’t be able to quiz Kat anymore. She looked for more books, biding her time until the shop was empty again.

“That looks like a great read.” A man startled her.

“Oh, I’m just browsing,” said Serilda.

“So, you are a witch?” he asked.

“What? No! Witches are not real,” Serilda frowned. “Besides, why are you interested? Are you one?”

The man chuckled. “I thought you said they are not real? I can smell a witch when I see one, and for your information, I’m a magician.”

Something about this man drew Serilda in. Was it his beautiful sapphire eyes, his dimpled smile, or his accent? This ‘magician’ was not from around here.

“Do you have a name, Mr Magician?” she smiled. She extended a hand, “I’m Serilda.”

The man shook her hand, “And I am James. Well, enjoy your book... perhaps we can have a drink someday?” James fished out a business card from his tailored coat. “Have a good day.”

Serilda stared after him, amazed and shocked. Did he just ask her out? Oh, Serilda. Don’t be silly; she chided herself. Kat gave her a grin as Serilda made her way back to her.

“He was handsome, wasn’t he?” she said. “Looks like you have an admirer. About time too, when was the last time you had a date?”

“I go out.” Serilda defended her social life.

“Going out with your friends doesn’t count. I mean real dates with a man!”

“How much is this book?” Serilda tried to change the subject, as she pushed the book she chose towards Kat.

“£8.99. Look, just go out with him, what’s the worst that could happen?”

“Kat, he hasn’t asked me out.” Serilda gave Kat a tenner.

“He gave you his business card. I think he has already.” Kat handed Serilda her change.

“Okay, fine. I’ll call him. I’ll see you later, Kat,” said Serilda.

“Goodbye, Serilda.”

*

Serilda changed course and instead of heading back home, she visited one house that was hit. She knew the Laurence's quite well. As Serilda passed the pond, she came upon the destruction of total devastation, as if a fire had ripped through the whole house. Serilda knew in her heart it wasn't a normal fire but a cursed one. She could smell the stench of the after effects of dark magic, a lingering sensation of thickening blood, burning flesh, and carcase. Serilda covered her nose, feeling nauseous.

"Can I help you?" a young woman approached Serilda.

"Rebecca?"

The girl stared at her for a while, and then she broke into a sad smile.

"Aunty Serilda," she cried.

Rebecca seemed like she hadn't slept in days.

"I'm sorry about your father, I heard... is it true?" Serilda asked.

"Was my father attacked? The answer is yes. Was my house targeted for no reason? Perhaps not," replied Rebecca.

Serilda, aware of people stopping and staring at them, decided this was not a good place to talk. The police had cornered the area off with police tape. Forensic vehicles and police cars blocked most of the road, and two were parked in front of what was once a beautiful home. Shattered glass, burnt timber, and blackened brick lay on top of each other like a tower. Other houses in the street had to be evacuated until the police could determine it was safe to come back, much to the annoyance of the neighbours.

"Rebecca, have you been here all night?"

Rebecca shrugged like she didn’t care. “I have nowhere to go. They couldn’t find Papa, you know. His body was blown to bits.” Tears brimmed over in her eyes.

“Oh, darling.” Serilda took Rebecca into her arms and let the poor girl cry her heart out.

“Were you able to recover anything afterwards?” she asked her when Rebecca had composed herself.

Rebecca shook her head. “Nothing was left.”

“Come on. You’re coming back to my place,” said Serilda. “I’ll make you a pie, and we can have a good chat.”

Rebecca looked back at what was once her home. “I’d love to,” she said gratefully.

*

The cherry pie and tea were just what Rebecca needed, thought Serilda, as she watched her tuck in. The evening was drawing in and Serilda worried Rebecca would sleep rough or not at all. As far as she was aware, the child had no other relations in the UK apart from her father. Mr Lawrence’s wife passed away some years ago, and Rebecca and Joe became more acquainted with Serilda, Pia, and Fleur afterwards. Soon, little Rebecca began to call her aunty Serilda, which warmed her heart.

The Laurence’s were among the hundreds who fled Panay and made Earth their home. They followed the laws the humans followed and blended in with this new world. No one suspected they were wizards and witches. Joe and his wife were careful to keep to themselves and avoided magic when possible. She had never heard of an incident in their lives when they used the power of magic in front of humans. So, to all, they were humans.

It was why Serilda couldn't understand why Joe and Rebecca were targeted like this. Rebecca was only eighteen, an orphan now thanks to Regina! Blood boiled underneath Serilda's skin. She couldn't believe all this happened right under her nose. Was she really that wrapped up in her own world, worrying about her girls when in the real world, things had turned nasty? A small niggling feeling told her this had something to do with Pia, and she was afraid for her.

"What are you thinking about?" Rebecca broke into her thoughts.

"Nothing to worry about," said Serilda with a smile. "Rebecca?"

"Yes?"

"If you don't mind, can I ask you some personal questions?"

"Of course," replied Rebecca. "Is it about my father's death?"

"My questions may lead to why he was killed." Serilda clasped her hands together. "I want to know details about him that perhaps you may know. You see, I'm working with the Magical Council and we know of more attacks in this region. Perhaps you can help me with the investigation. I'm sure you have heard of the other attacks?"

"The whole town's talking about it," Rebecca confirmed.

"Yes, they are," Serilda sighed, wishing they all would stop.

Serilda knew the Council wanted to hush things down and then there was the job of wiping the memories. That will be a big job as now the news had spread nationally. It was all over the papers, and every news station had reported it on their news channels. The Council must move fast. The humans were ruthless when it came to unearthing unexplained phenomenon. She had heard about the Salem witch trials, and it still sent a shudder down her spine. Bringing back her thoughts to the present situation, she focussed on Rebecca.

“I would like you to come with me to see the others who were targeted as you were. But before that, can you tell me if your father was involved in any magic, that could be a reason for this to happen?” Serilda asked.

“When Mum died, Dad moved a few things to somewhere safe. He never told me what it was, but recently, a few days before the house blew up, he gave me a key and said to me that if one day something happens... ” Rebecca took a deep breath and carried on, a few tears falling down her cheeks, “he told me to go and get the chest. That’s where I will find answers.”

Rebecca unclasped her necklace from her neck and slid the crystal onto her palm. “This is the key.”

“And where is the chest?” Serilda asked her gently.

“With Sandy and Blossom.”

(22)

EDDIE’S DEAL

The glass sphere rose in the air with Pia, Max, and Eddie standing, for there were no seats. Pia wondered where it would go and how, as there seemed no way out. The hut was pretty small. But Pia knew she was no longer in Yorkshire where her world was once ordinary. Like the mermaid city, this was another realm. Eddie was a wizard; at least she thought he was. He said his mother was the last of the Fire Witches of the previous generation. Could this be true? Could she trust him? This person could be lying. What if this place he was taking them to was somewhere evil? Thoughts whizzed in Pia’s mind, as the hut disintegrated before her eyes, and total darkness met them.

The sphere illuminated blue and continued to float in the dark void. Down below, Pia saw nothing. Max was also peering out of the glass, his expression confused.

“You know, you didn’t tell us your name,” said Max, turning to face this wizard.

“Oh, didn’t I? Then I must apologise.” But he didn’t. He grinned instead. “I’m Eddie.”

“Where are you taking us, Eddie?” Max asked bemused.

“I’d like to know that too. What is this place, anyway?” asked Pia. “Why can’t we see anything? Why are we literally in the dark?”

“This is my world, and you are welcome,” said Eddie. His attire of jeans and a t-shirt changed into black robes. A gold outline of a dragon was embroidered along the front and the back. To finish his look, he wore a

pointed hat with gold tassels hanging from the end of the point. His grin vanished.

“I rule here, and I am the master of this realm. I call this part the Dark Valley,” he announced.

“Not very original, is it?” Max said. “I mean, Dark Valley? It’s so childish and fairy-story-like.”

“How dare you insult me and my world,” Eddie’s expression darkened, but then cleared. “Never mind. You will see how original my world is soon... ”

“Where are our friends?” Max turned on Eddie. “Why did you capture them?”

“Are they safe?” Pia asked loudly, more than she intended to.

Eddie ignored those questions and went back to looking outside the sphere. He seemed engrossed in something.

“Ahh, there they are! My friends!” he jumped up and down excitedly. “You will love them!”

Max and Pia gasped. Huge, golden dragons came out of nowhere. Pia’s initial thought was they would engulf the sphere in their flames and crush them all, but they slowed down and flew beside them. Every few seconds, they breathed out intense red streams of fire and snaked themselves under and over the sphere.

Pia felt the heat through the glass, and she backed towards the middle, unable to breathe. Eddie snapped his fingers and one by one; the dragons flew away apart from one. It turned electric blue and flew in front of them as if guiding them to their destination. The heat vanished.

“These dragons are keepers of the valley. They have come to greet us. They are under my command, and they work only for me,” Eddie informed them proudly.

The blue dragon nose-dived suddenly, lighting the pathway with his stream of flames. That was when Pia saw a castle rise in the light ahead. The black smog lifted as they neared this majestic castle, and a new world emerged before them. Snow-capped mountains, and tall fir trees hugged the castle on both sides as it sat happily near a river. To top off this beautiful arrival, it began to snow.

“Amazing,” Pia breathed. “I don’t understand; you said this was the Dark Valley? But this place is stunning.”

“Thank you.” Eddie looked on swollen with pride. “We have passed the Dark Valley. We are now in the Delorster mountains.”

“... and the castle is yours too, I suspect,” Max said tightly.

“Not exactly. My uncle owns it. However, one day, it will pass on to me. I have no siblings, and he has no other family apart from me. He is counting his last days.” He commented in an emotionless statement.

Pia hated this man; he was not only arrogant, but he also had no soul. She decided not to share her opinion of him... yet. The sphere landed with a small thud on the lawn outside this magnificent castle. Like most castles Pia had seen, those in Yorkshire anyway, this was also grey with tall and long walls reaching out on both sides of the mountain valley. Where the ones back at home were in ruins, this one was intact.

A stream ran around the castle and a drawbridge was built over it. Metal armoured guards stood to attention as Pia and Max walked behind Eddie. The sun was rising, and Pia looked over at the Dark Valley behind her. The sun created a light burgundy shadow over it and saw a sight so incredible. It looked like Death had visited this place that was probably once a region of tranquillity and peace. The destruction of happiness... the destruction of a country?

“I wouldn’t have called it a region of tranquillity, far from it,” Eddie spoke. “This realm has seen many wars. Perhaps it could have been a beautiful place once but anyway, to answer your thoughts and questions and to feed your curiosity, I grew up here after my mother dumped me in the care of her brother. Yes, the Fire Witch didn’t want me.” Eddie was bitter. Pia felt sorry for him but didn’t want him to read her mind. She cleared her thoughts. Eddie chuckled, and she groaned in frustration.

“Please don’t read my mind,” she said.

“Sorry.” Eddie turned to face his guests. “That was rude of me. But there is no need to feel pity for me. I am a happy person.”

Pia rolled her eyes. How arrogant!

Eddie signalled for his guards to lower the drawbridge for them to walk over. The guards acted automatically, and soon, the bridge lowered and swung inwards, meeting in the middle with a loud thud. Once over the bridge, the guards operated the machinery, and the bridge opened and lifted high, leaving the castle unreachable.

As the three walked inside, Pia wasn’t in the least surprised at the grandeur she met. It housed spiralling staircases with no end in sight. Open corridors and large rooms cascaded on the right and left of them.

Pia felt she had stepped back in time to 16th Century England, walking through the pages of human history. She half expected to see a historical king to come and greet them, instead who came was someone who she least expected!

“Semblance! What are you doing here?” Max’s anger flared at once; his fists clenched. Pia wouldn’t be surprised if he changed into his panther form.

“Hello.” Semblance mock bowed. “It’s nice to see you too.”

“I have to say, I shouldn’t be surprised,” Max remarked. “You truly didn’t belong in Adisa. So, this was your grand plan all along?”

“I found my home and Eddie was kind enough to give me a place. I call it home.” Semblance glanced at Pia. “I see you are still acquainted with your princess.”

“Watch what you say, Semblance!” Max snapped.

“Come on, boys. Let’s not quarrel... you will get your chance.” Eddie clapped his hands, and a servant came forth. “Take the guests to their rooms and make sure they are comfortable.”

“What is this all about?” Pia asked Eddie.

“I expect you and Max down in the dining hall for dinner at six sharp. Now, I will take your leave. I am rather tired and need my rest.” With that, Eddie left Pia and Max. Semblance scoffed and walked away, shapeshifting along the way.

“There is something fishy going on and Semblance being here is no coincidence,” Max said through gritted teeth as they followed the servant.

“Oh, this is ridiculous. We must find the others and get out of here. We are wasting so much time!”

“I know, Pia, but right now we can’t do much. We have to bide our time and wait and see what happens next. My nerves are on fire on Semblance being here. Whatever comes next, I can bet we won’t like it.”

*

Dinner was eaten mostly in silence. Pia and Max sat on the right, Semblance on the left, and Eddie at the top of the table. It was a grand dining hall with long, red drapes, and royal blue carpets. The light fast

disappeared outside, and torches were lit. Eddie seemed to live a lot in the past.

"Don't you have electricity here?" Pia couldn't help herself. "We are in the 21st Century, right?"

Eddie laughed at this comment. "It is on Earth, my dear, but it is not so in my world. 'Electricity' as the humans call it is a cheater's 'magic'. It might give you power and light – that is human technology. But in our magical world, we need none of that for we create our own 'technology' with our abilities and our powers. Why would we need the new human invention 'internet' when we can do this!" Eddie drew an imaginary circle and blew blue smoke from his palm into the hole. A hologram appeared showing a film of events not familiar to Pia. It was a war clip.

When the film finished, the hologram closed in and disappeared.

"Is this real?" Pia asked, unimpressed.

"Yes," Max said. "Unfortunately, it is. This was a war among the men and ogres led by a powerful sorceress before Regina's reign. They forced the men to turn into shapeshifters. My ancestors were captured by this evil and were fed a potion that changed the body dynamics of the men. It was non-reversible.

"The curse was locked with us, and there was no way we could change back into men for a long while. The sorceress wanted the shapeshifters as slaves, and she succeeded. She wanted them as part of her collection. Not unlike Regina. The experiment worked on some men, but others died. Those who survived found a way to control the transformations. It took several decades before we could have our own life back."

"You do know your history," Eddie said with a tone of approval.

Semblance scowled.

"What happened to the sorceress?" Regina's interest peaked.

“That is an interesting question,” Semblance chimed in the conversation. “This witch was named Tatiana and was killed by no other than the Dark Queen of our time, Regina. They were sisters, and Regina wanted her power and she took it. The Great Battle of Ivowa. It was bloody and most vicious. Either sister showed no mercy, and it ended with one stab from a Black Blade.

When Regina fell, she was seconds before her imminent death, and that was when she set eyes on this blade. It whispered evil magic to her and with no hesitation, she grabbed it, stabbing Tatiana in the heart. The sorceress who ruled the galaxy for ten decades, crumpled to pieces.”

That was some story to take in.

“And the evil continues,” Pia said.

“What has Regina promised *you*?” Max shot the question at Semblance. “You attacked Pia, and we know she wants her. Are you part of this grand plan?”

“I remember the day your princess became a Fire Witch. She put me in a cage of fire!” Semblance spat. “I am supposed to be your brother. She is nothing, and you dare to side with that witch!”

“I am here, you know,” Pia said, feeling insignificant.

“Take that back!” Max fumed.

“Never!”

Growls echoed from the two shapeshifters.

“Okay, okay. Let’s calm down, shall we,” Eddie said nervously.

“I think I have had enough of this, Eddie. I can’t stand to be in the same room as that witch and the traitor!” Semblance threw his fork down and stormed out.

“Well, do all shapeshifters have the same tempers?” Eddie asked, looking toward the retreating shapeshifter. “I’ll deal with him later.”

Pia looked Eddie in the eye, “So you have struck a deal with Regina. She is just using you to get me, you do realise that, don’t you? When the time comes, she will throw you away or even kill you without a moment’s hesitation.”

“I am well aware of where I stand with Regina. I have to deliver you and your pendant to her,” said Eddie. “Tell me, what is so special about this pendant? It must be some extraordinary power for her to seek it and want to destroy you.” Eddie took a sip from his goblet.

“Where are our friends, Eddie? You will release them, and then we are leaving. It is not up for negotiation,” said Max. “I’m feeling rather tired of this small talk.”

Eddie pretended to ponder this for a moment. He stood up abruptly, his ‘friendliness’ gone.

“You have twelve hours to give yourself up, Pia, and then I will release your friends. Let me inform you they are in the custody of the Stygian mermaids who are not the friendliest of creatures I have known. However, they stick to their word and won’t harm them... unless you give me a reason to let them. They are so eager. A fair exchange, I believe.

“And don’t force me to shackle you or your boyfriend in chains... don’t try to escape. You do this quietly, and no one gets hurt. Twelve hours. Enjoy the rest of your dinner, won’t you?”

Eddie left the dining room.

“What do we do now?” Pia asked. “We are no closer to finding where the others are hidden, and we have no time left!”

“It’s not safe to talk here, Pia. We are being watched.” Max took her hand and led her out of the dining room.

Pia knew Max was at a loss as she was. Their hands were tied. Eddie had them exactly where he wanted them.

*

Back in her room, Pia paced the floor. Her thoughts were all over the shop. How was she going to release her friends from this monster? Will she ever reach the portal to the last Fire Witch?

Suddenly, she remembered what Eddie said previously... he wanted something from his mother – the old Fire Witch. He needed her to go to that realm... then why was he happy to let Regina have her?

Pia flung the door of her room open and ran into the corridor. She had to find Eddie now, but she had no idea where his room was. She saw a guard, alone.

“I must find your master, please help me. Can you tell me where he is?”

The guard made no sign that he heard her and carried on ignoring her.

“Hello! I am here!” Pia waved her hand over his eyes and jumped up to see his face. He was a tall soldier!

“The master is with a guest by the fountain,” he finally said.

“And where is this fountain?”

“It is in the courtyard. You go down the stairs and turn left. Walk along the white corridor and you will come to it.” The guard looked down at Pia, and his expression changed from vacant to astonishment, and then embarrassment. He bowed down to her.

“Your Highness, please forgive me.”

“Sorry, what?” Pia asked.

“You are Princess Pia, the only one who can save us all! We believe in you. Please be safe and cautious for evil is lurking everywhere. We are all with you.”

Feeling overwhelmed with this new appreciation, all she could say was, “Thank you. I will do my best.”

Pia slowed down and hid in the shadows of this stunning courtyard. Two golden dragons lay on the ground on either side of the fountain. The light from a pink moon shone down on two shrouded beings who stood together, their backs to her. Veils of red roses cascaded from the sides of the courtyard. It blew Pia’s breath away, and for a second, she forgot why she came until she heard a female voice.

“So you have the girl in the castle?” she asked.

“Indeed, she is here.” That was Eddie’s voice.

“The plan must go on as discussed. She must go to the old Fire Witch. Since you cannot get it for me, she has to be the one to get back what is mine.”

“There is one problem,” said Eddie. “Your sister, Regina, wants Pia at all costs... I... I have no choice. If I don’t deliver, she will kill me. If she finds out I am working for you, she won’t be happy, and she would still kill me.”

The woman chuckled. “I will guarantee your safety, Eddie. Regina killed our sister, Tatiana. Now a new generation of Fire Witches are born, I can finally have my revenge. However, I want my piece back. I may not be strong enough to kill my sister, but with this piece, I can surely make her weak and take some of her powers.

“She has offered you what? Gold and the power to rule your people? Can you trust my sister? After all, she killed Tatiana for exactly that and especially for the power of the throne. Panay has been damned. Next, it will be your world. Whatever you do here, is up to you. It is none of my business. Just get the princess to the old Fire Witch. Release her friends

apart from the mermaid girl, in the first exchange. You can then release the little girl when the princess returns."

Air rushed around the woman creating a mini cyclone and then she was gone. Pia stayed in the shadows until Eddie left the courtyard and then she went to Max's room.

*

"Max!" Pia banged on the door. "Open up!"

"What are you doing? Keep that up, and the guards will be onto us!" said Max as he hurriedly ushered Pia into the room.

"Don't worry about the guards; they are on our side." Pia quickly explained what that guard said to her a while before, and then she told him about the conversation between Eddie and Regina's sister.

Max whistled, "That is a turnaround!"

"But we must tread carefully. We must not let him know we know of this."

Pia kissed Max on the lips and went back to her room.

*

Bright sunlight woke Pia up. She hadn't realised she had fallen asleep, and it was morning already. It was some sleep she had; the bed was very comfortable. On her side table, there was a silver tray with some juice and a note.

'Good morning. Breakfast is at 9am. Please make your way to the dining room. Eddie.

Ps. My staff have left a dress for you to wear. I believe it will suit you.'

Pia searched the room with her eyes and found a rose embroidered cerise, corseted, low cut, Victorian dress. A simple, elegant, tiara lay on top of the dress. It was no secret he wanted to pretty her up.

Pia arrived at the dining hall just as Max did. He took her breath away as she took in his attire of a white silk shirt and black trousers. He couldn't take his eyes off her either, and his admiration showed in the twinkle in his eye. Pia's face flushed in embarrassment.

"You look... " he began.

"Thank you. You too," she said, blushing further.

The door was opened by a servant. Pia and Max walked in to see Eddie sitting at the top of the table. The table was spread with an assortment of fruits, cheeses, meat, and juice. A basket of bread and a pan of butter was placed in the middle. Eddie also had wine. The servants came forth and served Pia, Max, and Eddie.

"Ah, Pia. How exquisite you look," complimented Eddie as Pia took her seat. "I hope you like the dress I chose for you."

"It is lovely," said Pia.

Eddie didn't take his eyes off her; Pia felt uncomfortable. Max's hand clenched, and his face sported a scowl.

"I hope you two have had a comfortable sleep. Now before we do business, let us eat!"

"Where is Semblance?" Max asked Eddie.

"He had some urgent matters he needed to attend to," said Eddie.

It was clear to Pia that Eddie had sent Semblance away. She couldn't help but wonder what the reason was, did he not want Semblance on his new plans?

When everyone had their fill; the servants cleared the table and Eddie showed them to a pleasant room leading from the dining room.

*

Three comfy chairs were placed near a colossal roaring fireplace, with a round table between them.

“I have a proposition for you, Pia. I hope you will accept it,” Eddie began. “Originally I wanted to hand you and your pendant over to Queen Regina. But I have changed my mind.”

Pia looked outside the window and to her pleasant surprise, it was snowing. Eddie noticed her delight and ordered his staff to open the curtains. He wanted to show his guests the beauty of his world. With the curtains opened, Pia found they were in a glass globe; only the snow was outside. Pia stood up and went to the window and pressed her hands on the glass. The silence of the snow was magical. Reluctantly, Pia went back to her chair. Eddie smiling, conjured a globe with a forest and the snow inside. He presented it to Pia.

“For you, my Cherie,” he said.

“That’s... very kind of you. Thank you.” Pia took the globe.

“Don’t think you can sweeten us up with your shows and gifts,” said Max. “What do you want from us?”

“If you remember, I wanted you to bring something back from my mother. I would go and get it back myself, but she doesn’t like me. She has blocked me from entering her realm.”

“And what must I go and get for you?” asked Pia.

“It is an old relic. It is a time-lock compass,” said Eddie.

“Why do you want such a powerful instrument?” Max questioned him.

“Curious, aren’t we? Well, that is none of your business. But, let’s say I believe it is my duty to find out as much as possible about the people I work

for, and the people I work with; it helps me in my negotiation skills. For example, Pia, your parents and your sister, Leena, were supposed to be dead. But they are not."

"Do you know where they are?" Pia's hope ignited, surprised as she was about his knowledge on every subject. "Please tell me everything you know!"

Eddie laughed. "When the time comes, I shall, and only if you hold your end of your bargain I am about to propose, then yes, I think I can do that."

"He is bluffing. He knows nothing," Max warned. "This man is a liar and a fraud."

"Only time will tell if I am a liar and a fraud, Maxwell," sneered Eddie. "Now to business." Eddie clapped his hand, and a servant brought in a bowl of blue smoke. "My plan originally was to hand you over, Pia, to Regina, but my alliance has slightly changed. Your friends will be freed on the basis you go to my mother. This must be done alone. You must go and bring back the old relic. In the meantime, I will keep Ariel with me until your return. This little trip won't take you more than a few days to complete. Now, do we have a deal?"

"Why are you keeping Ariel?" Pia, of course, knew why, but she had to make him believe she knew nothing.

"I will stay instead of Ariel, let her go, please," Max volunteered.

"I can't let that happen!" said Pia. "You will free everyone, and then I will go," Pia demanded.

"I need Ariel as collateral, and I need to give you a reason to return to me, with the relic. I hope you understand that, Pia. Then you and Ariel are free."

"I will need to go back to my world to enter the realm of your mother, Eddie," said Pia, trying to buy some time on a plan. She didn't want him to

know she was going there, anyway.

“That will not be necessary. You will leave this realm and come back through this one. No diversions or Ariel will not live. I have instructed my staff to take you two down to the dungeons where your friends are looked after. You can meet them just this once. Oh, and don’t be silly and tell them about any of this. It will be our secret.”

*

“Oh, Pia!” Fleur hugged Pia. She and the others looked unharmed, shaken, yes, but not hurt.

“Thank the Gods you all are unharmed,” Pia cried. “That Eddie has some answering to do!”

Fleur seethed. “Why did you come, Pia? You shouldn’t have followed us from the observatory tower. We would have escaped.”

The dungeons weren’t what Pia expected. Instead of grimy and black cells, they were in a white cave with a pool in the middle. Light from fireflies and fluorescent plants illuminated the cave, and pool. However, despite its pleasantness, two hideous Stygian Mermaids holding silver tridents stood guard. They watched over them with their black, pitted eyes. Scales ran down their faces down to their webbed feet. Pia assumed they had similar abilities as Cami and her people, to be able to walk and breathe on land.

“I made a deal with Eddie and he has agreed to let you all go... apart from Ariel, I’m sorry. But Ariel won’t be harmed and will be looked after in the castle, treated fairly, and will be fed and clothed. She will be allowed to swim in his river, although it will be with surveillance. When I get back here, she and I will return home. I promise you that, Cami, Ario.”

“What kind of deal have you agreed to? And what will I tell Mum?”

“I can’t tell you and neither can Max. It’s for everyone’s safety. Just trust us, okay?”

“There must be another way, Pia. You can persuade Eddie,” said Cami hopefully, holding tightly onto her daughter.

“I can’t let you go by yourself, Pia. What if something happens over there and... and... ” Max couldn’t finish the sentence.

Ariel went to Pia and stood beside her.

“Nothing will happen to Princess Pia,” she said, taking hold of Pia’s hand. Ariel displayed a calm aura and one of a wise girl beyond her own years of age. “I believe she will return, and we will be able to come home.” Ariel looked up at Pia and smiled and spoke directly to her through telepathy. She was careful to block anyone else’s thoughts invading hers and Pia’s minds.

“*I have placed my blue stone in your pocket. Don’t take it out here. It will lead you to safety and help you in times of need. I trust you*.”

‘*Thank you*,’ Pia communicated back.

Ariel then spoke aloud for everyone to hear. “I feel safe, and no one has to worry about me. I will wait for the return of Princess Pia.”

“It is time for you to go,” one of the Stygian mermaids spoke in a squeaky voice.

Cami and Ario squeezed Ariel tightly with tears running down their face.

“I love you, Mama and Papa,” Ariel said.

“We love you too,” Cami said. She looked at Pia. “Be safe, Pia. We are grateful for what you are doing for us and for everyone in all realms.”

Pia hugged Cami. “I’ll make sure I bring Ariel home.” Pia then embraced Fleur and Jenny, and then Max, kissing him.

Two doors opened from the cave, one led to Yorkshire and the one led to Cami’s city. One by one, they trooped out. Pia’s heart sank as she and little Ariel stood side by side, holding hands. She hoped she could bring Ariel back home. Her thoughts went to her aunt, and she hoped she was safely back home.

(23)

THE ARRANGEMENT

The walk up the hill wasn’t difficult for Serilda. She enjoyed it. The sky wasn’t laden with ominous clouds, and there was a faint light blue, with a spring breeze.

Rebecca was already at the top waiting for her. Being young and fitter than herself, the girl had no trouble climbing this rise. Once there, Serilda looked upon the whole bay, stretching out for miles. Away from the harbour, some rain clouds gathered, and Serilda saw a sheet of rainfall down in that area. In the bay, at least the weather was good despite whatever trouble lay ahead of them.

On the hill was a lone cottage: Blossom and Sandy’s house. The green-eyed monster let herself be seen in Serilda as she thought how lucky it was to have a home here and to see such beautiful views every morning and night, and especially when the moon shone down on the sea. Pia and Fleur would have loved it.

“It is peaceful, isn’t it, aunty Serilda?” said Rebecca.

“It is,” agreed Serilda. “Well, let’s get this over and done with, shall we? I’m feeling nervous about all this already.”

Serilda remembered the time when Pia was attacked by the demon witch just last year at another cottage by the sea. But this was different. These people were good and kind. They were unaware of the dangerous magic or that Regina had caused the destruction of five houses and killed one of the respected and liked members of the magical community. If Regina gained

power and the knowledge she is desperately seeking... Serilda couldn't bear to think about it.

Rebecca knocked on the door (there was no bell) and a moment later a tall lady opened it, with a man behind her. They didn't seem thrilled to see them, but then the lady said,

"How can I help you?" This must be Blossom.

"Hello, I am Serilda, and this is Rebecca. We have come about a chest you have in your possession. It belonged to Rebecca's father, Joe."

The woman's eyes widened, and her bosom swelled. What a funny reaction, thought Serilda.

"Can we come in?" she asked.

The woman and the man backed away, "We are sorry, so rude," she said and let Serilda and Rebecca into the hall. "Let me introduce you to my husband, Sandy."

The inside of the house was airy, and the smell of the salty air mixed with fragranced candles made Serilda feel heady. There was something familiar about all this, but she couldn't put her finger to it. Blossom and Sandy showed them into the lounge.

"Please bring some tea, dear," Blossom ordered her husband who went away dutifully. "How is Joe?"

"He was murdered," said Rebecca bluntly. "It was all over the news. My father was killed when our house exploded."

"I'm so sorry to hear that. We have no means of communication up here, and neither do we have a television. We also don't read the papers," said Blossom. "We like to have a simple life. It was why we moved here from London. I'm babbling away... "

"My father told me there would be a chest waiting for me here," Rebecca said. "Is it here?"

“What is in this chest, if you don’t mind me asking?” asked Blossom.

Blossom’s eye for greed was quite evident. Serilda felt something very wrong here. They couldn’t trust these people.

“Joe’s instructions to Rebecca was to take the chest home,” Serilda told her, making a point.

Blossom seemed disappointed and stood up from her chair. “I’m afraid we cannot let you have the chest.”

“I’m sorry, what do you mean we can’t have the chest?” Serilda too stood up along with Rebecca who looked frightened.

“That chest has magic written all over it. It is not natural. Sandy!”

Sandy came rushing back. “Yes, dear?”

Blossom pointed at the two women. “The chest they are looking for is not here anymore. It is an unnatural thing, and so I have had to send it away. These women are no longer welcome here. Please show them out.”

“Blossom, what are you doing?” Sandy looked apologetically at Serilda and Rebecca, and meaningfully at his wife. “She is just nervous around strange things.”

“Please come into the kitchen, dear,” said Sandy pulling her away from the lounge.

Serilda heard them whispering in the hall.

“I wonder what all that was about,” said Rebecca.

“Something is wrong. I have been feeling it all the time we have been here. That lady was acting strangely,” said Serilda.

“Do you think they are genuine people? I’m thinking if my father chose the right people to look after the chest.”

“I think we should go,” Serilda stated.

“What about the chest?”

“We can’t leave without it... let’s go to the kitchen and see what’s going on. Don’t make a sound.” Serilda and Rebecca crept towards the kitchen.

“What was all that about?” Sandy threw the words at his wife. “I told you to keep cool. These witches must not suspect a thing. You could have said anything and lied. You could have told them Joe didn’t bring a chest here. Now you have done it. The plan is ruined!”

“Well, if the cats out of the bag – as the humans say... ”

Serilda’s eyes widened as Blossom changed into a demon witch. Her eyes were blood red, her shoes turned into clawed, bare feet, and her complexion turned a sickly green. Sandy also changed into his demon form, almost identical to ‘Blossom’, only he was a shade lighter and female. The witches set eyes to the floor where lay the bodies of the real Blossom and Sandy. They seemed to have been killed recently.

“If they gave us the chest, they could still have been alive,” said the green witch in a scratchy voice. Rebecca and Serilda winced.

“I can’t figure out why we can’t open this damn thing!” the other witch screamed. “Ooo, I can smell those foul witches!”

Before Serilda or Rebecca could run, the door swung open wide, and an invisible force lifted them, throwing them against the wall. Rebecca screamed. Serilda was confused.

“You!” the green witch pointed at Rebecca with her crooked finger. “Come.”

Rebecca floated to the witch. It was eerie, and Serilda shuddered in her skin.

“You will open the black box.”

Rebecca’s chain pulled against her neck, trying to connect with the chest.

“NO!” Serilda threw a blocking spell between the chest and the key. The key dropped back onto Rebecca’s neck.

The green witch shrieked. She raised an arm and clenched her clawed nails over her palm. Serilda’s spell broke. The key lifted from Rebecca’s chest and tried to reach the box again. This time Serilda threw a spell. The kitchen table flew in the air and crashed onto the witch. Rebecca abruptly awoke up from the witch’s spell. The other witch screamed, piercing and painful. Serilda, and Rebecca, crouched in agony, covering their ears with their hands. Then the noise died.

Both women looked up and saw the second witch trying to run with the chest! She started to conjure a portal.

“Stop!” Serilda yelled.

As a last resort, she channelled a magnet and the chest pulled away from the demon witch as she disappeared into the portal. The chest clanked onto the floor. With a wave of her hand, Serilda made the chest come to her, and she grabbed it. With one last look at the crumpled witch, Serilda and Rebecca transported out of the house.

*

Serilda and Rebecca appeared in the New Forest, the very one that led them to the realm of the Elders. The forest was quiet, with no activity in sight; even the birds were silent. It was eerie.

“Where are we?” asked Rebecca. “I thought we would go back to your house.”

“This is the New Forest.” Serilda told her about The Elders and the Chiefs she met last time she was here.

“If the demon witches got to poor Blossom and Sandy, they would know where I lived. One might be dead, but Regina would dispatch more of her cronies to do her dirty work. I don’t know how she found out about your father and the others, and this mysterious chest. But, I believe whatever is inside this box is important and powerful, and it relates to all of us.”

“These people you speak of – the Elders and the Chiefs – can we trust them?”

“The Elders are wizards who go back a long way in our history. They are ancient advisors to the witch and wizard community and have powers of their own. We are small compared to them... I know they have been in wars with the werewolves and the giants in a realm they once lived in.”

Rebecca was speechless, but it ignited hope in her. “Then they should be able to help defeat Regina!”

Serilda smiled at Rebecca’s naivety and felt sad at the same time. All these events led to the fact that Pia was a Fire Witch and that put her in danger constantly. Oh, she so wished her girls were home now.

“Aunty, are you okay?” Rebecca stopped walking. She saw Serilda crying. “I’m sorry, did I say something wrong?”

“It’s just silly me.” Serilda wiped her tears away. “I was thinking of my girls... come, let’s walk on towards the sound of the waterfall. Can you hear it?”

Rebecca nodded a yes.

“I’ll fill in you along the way about Pia, my niece who is now a Fire Witch, and tell you about everything and everyone involved in this mess.”

As Serilda finished her story; they came to a clearing – the realm of the Elders. There was the breath-taking waterfall, the sweeping hills and the

beauty of the skies. There was the woodland where the other creatures lived.

Their eyes fell on an assortment of creatures, men, and the Elders. All stood up at the two women arrived at the circle.

“Hello,” said Serilda. “I hope we are not interrupting something?”

“Not at all. We were hoping you would come... someday soon,” said Algornian. “There have been developments.”

“Why didn’t you call on me sooner?” Serilda asked. “I would have come straight away.”

“We couldn’t get a trace on your movements, you seem to be away a lot,” said Daedra.

“I suppose so. Well, this is some turnout,” Serilda exclaimed. She noticed Kardia, who gave her a friendly nod.

“What is it you have there?” Antmer asked, directing his gaze at the black box Serilda was carrying.

“This is a chest left to Rebecca by her father, Joe, who was killed by dark magic. We believe it to be the work of Regina. Four other homes were hit that week, and we think they are all linked. We don’t know any more apart from the fact that whatever is in this box must be very concerning for Regina to attack them.”

“I am sorry for your loss,” Algornian said to Rebecca. “Serilda, Rebecca, please join us.”

“Why have you gathered like this?” Serilda asked as she and Rebecca took their places at the circle.

“We have formed an alliance with the Men. This meeting was declared as a matter of urgency, and we couldn’t wait any longer. We heard of the attacks back in your hometown, Serilda. There has been more disruption in the human world, and it seems to be spreading. We believe several witches

of evil are creating this diversion, but we do not know more than that," said Daedra. "Meanwhile, we need to come up with a plan if it comes down to war. We must be ready. Kardia and Atharos have been keeping tabs on Regina's movements."

Serilda watched the faces in front of her and gasped when she one whom she had met recently.

"James!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, you know each other?" asked Algornian.

James... didn't he say he was a wizard?

"We met at a bookshop," James said. "It's nice to see you again, Serilda."

"Likewise," Serilda smiled and said, "James is quite an illusionist, I hear. Didn't you say you were a wizard?"

"Not quite, I am a Magician. I have been given many other names, but I like to keep to James. I work with the occult side of my world... or the supernatural. I, and my friends," James gestured towards his friends sitting with him, "are all human as I am. The Elders called upon us through our mediumship."

"... Oh," said Serilda.

"We cannot have a supernatural being destroy humanity or our planet in their quest to get what isn't theirs. We will join forces to destroy them and help the Fire Witches in any way we can."

So he knows about Pia! Serilda's heart danced. Perhaps she could trust him.

"Now we have all that cleared," Algornian spoke. "Perhaps we could get back to the box?"

"Of course," said Serilda and became her professional self. "Two demon witches attacked us just a short while ago, back in our hometown. They

were from Regina’s clan, and they wanted the chest. We were lucky to get away.”

The sound of the waterfall washed over everyone as they absorbed what they heard. Fine mist travelled over to them, and Serilda felt the coolness on her face. Bird song reached them from afar.

“Let us open this mysterious box,” declared Algornian.

“If you don’t mind, Sir, I would like to open it with just aunty Serilda by my side and in private,” Rebecca said.

“Of course, if that is what you want,” said Antmer, who had stayed quiet all this time.

“What if the chest contains black magic? Surely, one of us must be present to prevent any ill turns this box may produce?” Busmer asked.

“That’s probably a good idea,” said Serilda. “Rebecca?”

“That would be okay with me,” she replied.

“This meeting is adjourned for today,” Algornian spoke to the circle. “Thank you for coming; we will be in touch with you all shortly again in a few days.”

The crowd dispersed muttering among themselves. Some sounded quite irritated, and some sounded relieved.

“Who would you like to be with you, Rebecca?” asked Algornian.

Rebecca pointed at Antmer.

“Very well. Antmer will inform us of the events of this chest, and we shall discuss what to do next.” Algornian, Busmer, and Daedra, left the waterfall in a swirl of colour.

Antmer turned to the women. “It will be safe to open this chest in a secluded but a more intimate space. I will take you behind the waterfall.”

He levitated the chest, and a rope conjured from his spell, bound around it. Antmer placed a hand on the shoulders of Serilda and Rebecca. They

floated towards the waterfall and in the next moment they were behind it. The chest was brought down, and the rope dispelled.

“This is safe enough. No one will be able to see or hear what we do here. Please... ” Antmer directed Rebecca to go to the chest.

With trembling hands, Rebecca unlocked her neck chain and took the key off it. She placed it in the embossed space on the top of the chest, which grew in size, making the three people step back. A golden hue spread to the four corners of the chest and then the sides, back, and front, fell apart. It revealed a glass, square box with a scroll inside and in another box, there was a black blade. Another mysterious item lay next to the blade – it looked like a spell book.

Rebecca picked up the scroll box and whispered an opening spell, but the box stayed shut.

“The key... ” she took the key from the outer shell of the chest and placed it on top of the glass box. The scroll disappeared from inside and appeared in Rebecca’s hand.

“Well done!” Serilda cheered.

“Dear Rebecca,” she began. “If you are holding this scroll and you can still read it, then the responsibility has been passed onto you. I hope you don’t see this as a curse, but as the highest blessing you can receive. In my time of death, which I feel is very near, I... ” Rebecca couldn’t go on and broke down. “I’m sorry, I can’t do this.”

“May I?” asked Serilda.

Rebecca handed the scroll to Serilda, and the writing changed. The letters began to rearrange themselves and then became sentences again.

“This scroll has changed hands,” Serilda read. “This witch is good. Therefore I will reveal the information. Rebecca Laurence is the new Head of the Secret Keepers. She is responsible for the new Fire Witch, Pia

Clandestine. Rebecca Lawrence is to find Pia and hand her the spell book and the Black Blade. The spell book will reveal its answers when asked. Please refer to the book regarding the Black Blade."

The writing disappeared. Rebecca opened the book to the Black Blade, and read,

"Those who seek supremacy will not have access to the blade's powers. Those who seek peace and are honourable and selfless will have the authority and strength from this blade and therefore battle all evil."

"That's it?" asked Serilda.

"Yeah, I suppose so."

"There is more information that we seek in that scroll. Only Rebecca has access to it. Antmer, I will have to leave to speak to the Magical Council in London. I request for Rebecca to stay here for the duration."

"Please don't leave me. I need you." Rebecca took Serilda's arm.

"I promise I will be back before you know it. Please re-read the scroll. I know Joe has put in information only for your eyes. If you feel you can and you want to, you can reveal it to me on my return. Antmer, can I have your trust to look after Rebecca whilst I am gone?"

"You have my word," said Antmer.

"I will come with you." James suddenly appeared from behind the waterfall.

"Where did you come from? You were not invited here, and neither are you welcome," Serilda said this rather firmly than intended. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rude."

"I'll let it pass," James smiled.

"Look, I don't need any protection. I am a witch, and I have my own powers. Anyhow, it will super succeed any you possess."

“Serilda, please take James’ services of protection. I will not feel happy to let you go on your own. It isn’t safe anymore,” said Antmer.

“So, it is settled then,” said James.

“Good. I’ll see you two out.” Antmer clapped his hands.

In the next minute, Serilda and James stood outside her house.

EPILOGUE

REGINA

The embers flew in the air. Her rage couldn't be controlled. The village burned before her, its residents fleeing and screaming, terrified. Some foolishly tried to salvage their blackened homes, casting spells to put the water out. In the end, they perished. Silly witches. Didn't they know this fire was cursed?

The destruction didn't make Regina any happier. However; it made her feel more miserable than she already was. She threw her hood back on and turned away from the dying village, ignoring the screams. Her servant opened the carriage door, and she took her seat. Regina preferred to travel on wheels. Flying or transporting was tiring at the best of times.

The carriage rolled past other small dwellings. People on the streets cowered. Regina looked on ahead. Her mood was dark, very dark. How dare Lelitha cross her! By now, the Fire Witch should be hers! What deal had she done with Eddie? Why couldn't she find the low-lying traitor!

The carriage halted, and the door opened. Regina was back at her castle already. She stepped off the carriage, slapping any help from her servant away, and marched towards the castle. The guards bowed, but she didn't acknowledge them. The maids scurried to her needs. They shouldn't have bothered as Regina carried on towards the west wing. She paid no heed to anyone. No one was worthy of her attention. No one! Her cry suffocated her, but she couldn't let her fears and her control buckle down on her, neither could she let her servants see she has a weakness.

Today wasn’t a good day. The servants knew that. They whispered in the shadows of the vast castle, unseen. They dare not approach her for fear of being obliterated.

Regina threw her cloak off and slumped into her rocking chair in the library. A lush green lawn stretched out from the window, red and white roses lined her garden on one end and lilies, amaryllis, golden rays, all grew on the other side.

A greenhouse was built just for her, and it stood a few feet away from where she sat. Regina liked to tend the greenhouse plants herself. Her rage dissipated slowly as she drank some wine and looked out to her garden. There was a lot of work to do, but it could wait. A timid knock got her attention.

“What is it!” Regina barked.

The door opened, and a little girl stood by a quivering maid.

“Mama,” the girl said.

“Oh my darling, come here.”

The girl ran in, and the door closed. Regina put her glass of wine down and took her seven-year-old onto her lap.

“What is it you have here, honey?” Regina took a piece of paper from her.

Her daughter, Star, had drawn a picture of herself holding her mummy’s hand, watching the moons change places in the galaxy.

“I love it!” Regina’s kissed her daughter’s head. “You are so talented.”

“Mama, why do you look so sad?”

“Oh, it’s nothing my lovely. Mama is just tired.”

Star snuggled into her mother’s bosom, and Regina swelled in happiness. The Fire Witch problem was not significant right this moment. She stroked

her daughter’s long auburn locks as she rocked back and forth in the chair.

*

SERILDA

Serilda and Fleur sat side by side on the bench, watching the noisy seagulls and throwing them bits of bread. The birds swooped down and took the food greedily and flew off again. The morning sun gave off a pleasant heat, warming their faces. Fleur ate her fish and chips and ignored one particular gull who tried to steal her food.

“Shoo! Go away!”

Serilda laughed; she hadn’t done that in a long time. When she arrived back in the bay, she found Fleur sitting on their doorstep. Serilda flew to her and took her in her arms. Where is Pia, she asked. With tears in her eyes, Fleur explained everything. Serilda wanted to scream, to shout. She wanted to lash out and kill this Eddie! How dare he keep her niece, how dare he! She wanted to go and get Pia back, to get her poor girl back. Oh, what she must go through. And poor Fleur, to be kept imprisoned... that man had a lot to answer for!

Fleur then slumped against her. She was hot and shivery. James carried Fleur inside and put her on the settee. Serilda thanked him.

“Have some tea, James. And thank you,” she said.

“We will work on this together. We will get your niece back. I have to go now but call me if you plan to make a trip somewhere. I won’t let you go alone.” James had let himself out.

Serilda contacted Mike, and Rita, and told them what Fleur told her. Her good friends came to her that instant. They talked about what they could do,

and Serilda mentioned James. They made notes and wrote things down. Rita tried a locator spell and admitted defeat when the spell wouldn't work.

"We will locate her and bring her back." Rita tried to make Serilda feel better.

"Thank you, Rita." Serilda smiled on the outside but was terrified.

The next day, Aradna, and Régade, were put in the picture too. Since then, every magical being in the Council had been working hard to find a solution to finding this realm and finding out exactly where Pia was. They couldn't lose a Fire Witch!

A boat anchored in slowly and a man jumped out with his co-worker. They hauled buckets of seafood and plopped them down on the sand. One waved at Serilda and Rebecca.

"Beautiful morning, isn't it!" he shouted.

"Yes, just beautiful," she called back.

The man smiled and went back to his boat.

"Mum, I miss Pia, you know. A lot," said Fleur.

"I know dear, I do too."

"How are we going to find her?"

"I don't know but we have to have faith in us and in the others who are doing all they can help us."

Rebecca came to Serilda's mind. She hadn't told Fleur about her yet or the recent attacks. She would... but later. She didn't want to worry her mind. Serilda hoped Rebecca would find some answers in the scroll. Time was running out and fast.

REBECCA

Rebecca stopped crying. It was hard reading her father's writing. The scroll had now worn out for she had rolled and unrolled it many times. Antmer had given her a splendid room with a wonderful balcony that looked out at the garden. She could see the waterfall from there.

She picked up the scroll again and reread it, hoping it would make sense.

"Dear Rebecca,

If you are holding this scroll, and you can still read it, then the responsibility of a Secret Keeper has been passed onto you. I hope you don't see this as a curse, but as the highest blessing, you can receive. In my time of death, which I feel is very near, I want you to be strong. Read the rest of the scroll carefully and slowly, for the information I am about to reveal will help you understand the relevance of a Secret Keeper.

At the time of the first Fire Witches, the Sun messenger recruited five Secret Keepers . The job of the Secret Keeper was to protect the Fire Witch he or she was bound to. Your Fire Witch is Pia Clandestine, daughter of Senon and Marcaria Clandestine of Panay and niece of Serilda Atonis.

With this scroll, you will find a Black Blade and a Spell Book. The Book is magical and will only reveal information to the Secret Keeper and the Fire Witch. The Secret Keeper must present the Book and the Black Blade to the Fire Witch.

Take care, my lovely daughter,
Papa.x

Ps. Below is the information you need.

<u>Information on Pia Clandestine:</u>

Pia has a twin, Leena Clandestine.

Both parents and sister presumed dead.

Pia Clandestine is a Princess of Panay.

History:

Senon Clandestine, Prince of Evian, and Marcaria Clandestine, Lady of Cressea Waters, fled Panay when under attack from the Dark Queen, Regina.

The Dark Queen was given knowledge of a pendant that would destroy her and her powers, and she was after it. The pendant is in the procession of Marcaria Clandestine. The pendant is seeking five crystals. The crystals with the four other Fire Witches will bring down the Dark Queen. The prophecy is to find the other four Secret Keepers, the Crystals, and the Fire Witches. Only then will peace reign again.

PIA

Pia stood at the foot of the tall mountain, steeped in metres of snow. Her red cloak blew around her as the chilly wind rushed down from the mountainside. She wore the necklace, snug against her chest. Her hand clasped Ariel's stone in her robe pocket.

The name of Eddie's mother, the old and last Fire Witch of the last generation, was Lavinia Mallor who lived on Erimont, the highest and almost impossible mountain to reach by anyone.

Ask for her name, Eddie said. He gave her no more information. Pia wished she had Fleur, Max, and Jenny with her. She didn't want to do this alone. She knew Lavinia could give her answers and point her in the right direction on how to defeat Regina. But she also had to bring back the old relic Eddie wanted. Will Lavinia give it up so easily? Only time would tell.

Pia took the first step on the mountain.

To be continued...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MALIKA GANDHI lives in the East Midlands, UK. She is a homemaker and in between caring for her family, she writes her books and works on her art.

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